

## **Psychosomatic by hexlibris**

**Series:** [I Don't Like People \(But I Think I Like You\) \[2\]](#)

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**Summary:**

Steve loses his head, his voice, and his heart.

## 1. Chapter 1

I

*Red for stop. Creation and destruction. Wild child. He doesn't like the water. Blue, for Billy.*

Steve Harrington's world comes to an end on a rainy school day in May, 1985. For real, this time.

There he is, sitting in the back row of English—always the back row, just to avoid being called out by his teachers—trying to stop his eyelids from drooping further and further down his face. Sometimes he's so tired it feels like he's melting, slipping through the cracks in his chair. Sometimes he wonders if anyone would notice, if he were to sink below the floor one day and disappear.

"Are we boring you, Mr. Harrington?" Mr. Aird asks, and someone—Tommy, probably—sniggers.

It's an effort for Steve to pull himself back up, to gather the edges of himself so they aren't spilling over the sides. "No, sir."

"In that case," Mr. Aird says, "could you read for us the second paragraph, starting from line three?"

Steve looks down at the page in front of him. Something in his ears is buzzing, and he's almost sure it's more laughter, threatening like a wave. "Uh," he says. *You stupid bastard*, he tells himself. *You fucking stupid bastard*. It's worse when he's tired: the words float before his eyes like letters in some sludgy, mixed-up alphabet soup. "I, uh—"

"Mush mouth," Tommy says, and the laughter—rising, falling—is quickly quelled by a look from Mr. Aird.

Tommy's got it wrong, Steve thinks. It's not his mouth that's the problem. He spent all night listening to *The Talented Mr. Ripley* on cassette tape to prepare for today, he knows what he's supposed to be

reading—his brain's just broken.

"The room's all yours, Mr. Harrington." Mr. Aird leans back against the edge of his desk, waiting in that smug, ankles-crossed teacher pose Steve's always hated.

Instead of focusing on the words, he looks up. The clock above Mr. Aird's head glares back down at him—there's something off about that clock, Steve thinks. Then he realizes that the hands are frozen on seven-thirty, and that's not right, someone should change the batteries, shouldn't they?

Another thing that's off about today: not just the stopped clock, but the rain. Rain in late May, when they should be having clear skies and weather warm enough for T-shirts and shorts, instead of shivering in hoodies and jeans like winter never released them from its dead-eyed grip.

The rain drums against the windows like restless hands, falling in thick, gray sheets, flooding the parking lot.

Off, Steve thinks. He looks down at his watch and sees that it's actually nine-thirty, *not* seven-thirty. He has another hour of this torture, and—

And Billy's late.

His desk sits in front of Steve, gaping in the midst of all the other desks like a missing tooth. That empty desk is off in the worst possible way, because Billy's never late. Billy's sense of timing is near-impeccable; he always beats Steve to the best spaces in the parking lot, *always* beats him to the arcade no matter how early Steve sets his alarm. Despite his unsavory reputation, Billy actually has his shit together, unlike Steve.

If he were here, Steve would be having an easier time of it. Not that there's a lot Billy can do, not when they're in public—but that's why he started sitting in front of Steve in the first place. It's reassuring, being able to look up and see that he's there. The words come sharp instead of sludgy, when Steve has something to focus on. The blue of Billy's jacket. The light that catches on his hair. The soft crack of his

knuckles as he rolls them between his palms.

Of course, a lot of the time Billy's no fucking help at all. He sits in front of Steve and *preens*, like a goddamn peacock, stretching his arms above his head so that Steve can see the muscles in his back bulging under his too-small shirt; standing up to hand in something at the teacher's desk and swaying his hips in a way that's perfectly calculated, impossible for Steve to ignore. Steve will nudge the legs of his desk forwards until they knock against the back of Billy's chair, a silent plea to fucking *cut it out*. Billy's answering smirk, the flash of his earring as he turns to tip Steve a sleazy wink: *you love it*.

Occasionally Billy will throw scrunched up balls of paper behind him, sometimes with something lewd written on it (and Steve's not a total fucking moron—he knows what the words *suck my dick* look like, even in Billy's chickenscratch handwriting)—most of the time not, because that's the sort of shit that could get them kicked off the basketball team. These balls of paper will bounce off Steve's forehead or his hand when he's not looking; when Billy can sense that he's slipping, like he is now. And even though Billy's late, Steve's still waiting for it—waiting for that ball of paper to smack him in the face and bring him back to Earth.

It never comes.

Instead, what does come is Nancy Wheeler's scream: high-pitched, terrified. Steve, rather than crashing to Earth, flies upwards to his feet.

He looks out the window, into the parking lot, half-expecting a Demodog or even a Demogorgon, baring its maw of teeth at him in a monstrous grin. What he sees instead is Billy—sees him the way someone like Maxine Mayfield might see him, or Lucas Sinclair.

As a nightmare in red.

Red for danger, red for the blood that's everywhere—on his denim jacket, his face, matting his hair. It's not Billy's blood—he's impeccable like that—but Principal Whitechurch's. The only thing that's not red—red for danger, red for stop, *stop hitting him Billy, you're gonna kill him*, Max had shrieked at Jonathan's—is Billy's eyes.

They're black—pupils blown so wide you wouldn't have even thought they were blue, couldn't possibly be blue, not blue in the way that Steve sees them when they're alone (blue with love and laughter and hope and yeah, sometimes anger and grief and getting pissed off to the point of calling each other names, because they're still just boys, young and dumb and figuring each other out). The blood's bad—the blood's horrific, none of them can understand how *punching* someone produces that much blood—but Billy's eyes are worse, on that off, rainy May day when Steve's world ends. They're black, with not a sliver of recognition or humanity in them. Like looking into the eye of a storm, and seeing nothing but a silent, howling emptiness.

Principal Whitechurch is chauffeured to the ER inside the depths of a wailing ambulance and everyone's saying that he'll probably need stitches, maybe even plastic surgery, because his face is fucked up worse than Steve's was last November. The bruises have since faded, but sometimes Steve's jaw clicks when he eats, as if Billy's fists permanently loosened something in his skull.

They're meant to be past that, though.

*Meant*. Five letters, what Steve's brain categorizes as a green word. Green for go, green for A-OK, just peachy. *Meant*—they're meant to be past Billy lashing out when he's upset, but if there's one thing that Steve's learned from dating Billy Hargrove, is that words don't mean shit unless actions back it up.

The last time Steve ever sees Billy is when he's being dragged into the back of Chief Hopper's cruiser by the links of his handcuffs, Principal Whitechurch's blood masking his face like war paint.

*Boom. Kaput.*

For days afterwards, the corridors buzz with back-and-forth retellings of 'The Incident'—the moment that Billy Hargrove officially cracked, like an egg that's been dropped too many times. All of these retellings are different depending on who you hear it from: Ronnie Redford insists that Billy was drunk, no, no, he was high, says Tina Walsh, high as a kite—coke makes people do crazy things, didn't you hear what that guy down in Florida did while buzzed? Lies and fairytales, Jasmine Stewart tells Steve; Billy was neither drunk or high. Billy

was late because his dad beats him on the regular. Billy was already looking for a fight when he came to school, and Principal Whitechurch was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

That's the first thing they all agree on, no matter how much the story changes. If it hadn't happened to Principal Whitechurch, it would've happened to somebody else, anybody who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, because Billy's crazy.

That's the second thing they all agree on: that Billy's crazy, and always was. The kind of crazy that lurks under the surface of people's smiles like a hidden rip, ready to pull you under; the kind of crazy that, when exposed, just *snaps*, like:

"Jesus, I always knew Hargrove had a screw loose, did you see the way he—?"

"Probably gonna end up in juvenile down in Pendleton, high security, they're all nut jobs there—"

"Fucking crazy, man, like who does that? The guy needs a muzzle—"

Crazy—now there's a word that Steve Harrington would recognize anywhere. Billy Hargrove's one crazy mother, they all agreed on that strangely rainy day in May; once upon a time, Steve might've said the same. There's the rub: if Billy's crazy, then he is too. Only he's better at hiding it.

Just.

\*

After learning about what the atomic bomb did to the people of Hiroshima, Steve's decided that, if the Russians ever nuke the US, he'd rather just be blown away at Ground Zero. A flash and then total oblivion—it's not anything he would want to be a survivor of, because nuclear fallout sounds fucking *horrifying*.

The fallout of Billy's explosion is like radiation poisoning, in a way. An agonizingly slow death. Not just like Steve's sinking under the floor, but like he can't even scream, or cry for help.

It's going on two weeks since The Incident—or, if you want to be real specific, three hundred and thirty-six hours, twenty thousand, one hundred and sixty minutes, and roughly one million seconds—not that Steve's *keeping count*, or anything, just. He thought Billy would've called by now. Billy doesn't like being told what to do, but they have rules. Rule 1: never go to bed angry with one another. Rule 2: call Steve if you need help. They both need these rules to hold things up, like training wheels for a kid's bike; without them, Billy's chaotic and Steve takes flight like a panicked bird. It's not just for Billy's sake—Steve's not his goddamn parent, never wants Billy to feel like he's trying to control him—it's their *thing*, since they've become a thing.

Just as Billy brings Steve back to Earth, Steve's always been able to pull Billy back from whatever edge he might be preparing to throw himself from. Billy will call Steve to give him a heads-up that he's gonna crash at his house for a few days, or that he's gonna be angry when Steve sees him, angry enough to break things. Steve's okay with it, as long as Billy *calls*. As long as Billy warns him so he can actually do *something*, instead of just fucking standing there on the other side of the glass, watching it play out.

In the end, Billy had never called him. He'd been late, and he's *never* late. Steve's still waiting for him to call, but it's been two weeks, and every time he sees Max at the arcade, she just gives him this look that's a three-way tie between lost and furious and helpless, the face of a girl who's been backed into a corner with no escape route.

Kaput.

"Nance," Steve says, "you okay?"

Nancy gives a start, rearranging the strands of hair that have fallen loose from her ponytail so they're out of her eyes. "Oh, yes," she says, smiling dazedly at him. "Fine. Nice—nice meatloaf, isn't it?"

"You know what they do to queers at Pendleton Correctional?" Tommy H's voice drifts across the cafeteria and Nancy's fingers immediately grip the handle of her fork so that the teeth are facing down, her knuckles flaring white.

“Ignore him,” Jonathan says under his breath. He’s gnawing at his lower lip as he underlines a passage in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* with his Sharpie. It’s the same passage he’s been underlining for the last ten minutes, Steve’s noticed; ever since Tommy sat down, and started talking about Billy.

“I will if you will,” he says, quietly. Nancy’s looking at him with eyes that are wide and distant and glassy: there’s an apology brimming there, but Steve’s already told her that she needs to stop apologizing, because he’s tired of playing the blame game with her.

“They *shock ‘em, I heard,*” Tommy’s saying. Tina Walsh, Carol Chavez, Laurie Powell, Amy Labrovitz—all four of them are hanging off him like ornamental jewelry, listening to his every word. Steve can’t even look at him without being reminded of himself in reverse, pre-Barb, pre-Billy: the former King of Hawkins High. Chop one head off, two more grow in its place. “Stick these thingies on their heads and send three hundred and fifty volts right into their frontal lobes —”

The thin *screeeee* of Nancy’s fork dragging across the table skitters down Steve’s neck, collecting at the base of his spinal cord like chips of ice.

“Ignore, ignore, ignore.” Jonathan’s hand is splattered with ink, the tip of his Sharpie swooping into the pages of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* like one of those toy drinking birds Steve’s dad has in his office; moving up and down in endless, idiot loops.

“The fuck you lookin’ at, mush mouth?” Tommy says, over Nancy’s shoulder. “You want a kiss?”

He puckers his face at Steve and makes wet, sloppy noises with his mouth. Nancy’s fork wobbles, then halts; she looks up at Steve almost pleadingly. He’s only ever seen that expression on her face once before: on the night she’d pointed a gun right between his eyes.

“Hey,” Tommy says, slipping off his perch. “I’m fuckin’ talking to you, Harrington—*do you want a kiss?*”

It’s a moment that feels fragile, made of glass. If Steve were Billy, he

would've already broken it—thrown the moment right in Tommy's pug-like face. Felt the oh-so-satisfying crack of bone under his fist. Steve's sneaker beats an anxious tattoo against the floor as he forces himself to lower his gaze. The buzzing's back, but it's not laughter, oh no. It's the sound of his own blood in his veins, adrenaline sparking like a lit firework.

"Sorry, I don't swing that way," Tommy says, with a theatrical sigh of mock remorse. "*Byers* might, though. Maybe Princess Wheeler will share him with you, if you ask nicely."

"Dude, would you give it a rest?" Jonathan snaps, turning around to glare at him. "Some of us are trying to study here."

Tommy hoots. "*Two of you, Byers.* Only two of you are trying. The other one—you wanna take a shot at me, Harrington? Huh? Go ahead. You and I both know how it'll end." When Steve doesn't answer, he shakes his head, heaves another sigh as he turns back to Carol: "Fuckin' queers, babe. That's why they make 'em ride the lightning. Their minds are all screwy, weak as rosewater—"

Steve doesn't know who moves first, him or Jonathan—only that he's leaping over Nancy's head to get at Tommy, crashing into him with such force they're landing heavily on the floor of the cafeteria in a tangle of arms and legs and he tastes blood, coppery and metallic, in the back of his throat. Girls are screaming, Jonathan's swearing and Tommy's hissing in his ear, "Yeah that's it, mush mouth, be the white knight for your fag boyfriend," egging him on even as Steve pounds his fist into his snarling freckled face and watches the blood fly upwards—this must be how Billy feels when he snaps, he thinks; like he's moving mountains with his bare hands, rearranging the landscape into new and wonderful shapes. Creation and destruction, bound together with a grim ribbon of red.

\*

Hopper's been drinking. The smell of bourbon, tart and strong, assails Steve's nostrils as he's thrown unceremoniously against the wall of the jail cell. "*Teenagers.*"

"You're observant," Jonathan says from the floor. Hopper scowls at

him dangerously, his eyes haggard and bloodshot; Steve wonders if he's still drunk. He wouldn't be surprised. It's one of those days to get drunk, he thinks—or maybe one of those years.

"Don't play the smartass with me, Byers. I shouldn't have to remind you gentlemen that, legally, you're on thin fucking ice—"

"Tommy started it," Steve says. He peels himself away from the wall—leaving spots of blood in his wake, because he's never been great at fights, always seems to come out of them worse for wear—smoothing down the creases in his shirt. Like it'll make any fucking difference; that's the second shirt he's ruined because he didn't plant his feet. The first time, it'd been a stray Demodog, leaping out at him from the waters of Eel Race River. *Billy* was the one who cleaned up the blood then, he remembers with a twinge.

"There were witnesses," Jonathan says. "Heaps of them. Ask anyone who was—"

"I've already spoken to most of your classmates," Hopper says. "Including Nancy Wheeler," he adds firmly, when Jonathan opens his mouth. "The general consensus is that it was an unprovoked attack."

"*Unprovoked?*" repeats Jonathan, incredulous. "Tommy was being hateful."

"My heart bleeds," snarls Hopper. He slams the door of the cell shut with a hollow *clang* and then leans through the bars. "Jesus Christ, Byers, so what? This is *America*. If I locked up the townspeople every time they said something hateful then there wouldn't be any people to call it a town *left*."

"That's not the point," Steve says.

"No, the *point*, Harrington, is that the both of you are eighteen years old. If Healey decides to press charges, you'll be tried as adults. Do you understand what that entails?"

"Yes," he says stiffly.

"I don't think you do." Hopper presses his face up against the bars, bares his teeth at Steve like a man in pain. "If you get a criminal

record, you won't be able to work. You won't be able to travel. A conviction will follow you everywhere you go, for the rest of your life—and a narrow life it'll be, just 'cause some schmuck hurt your precious *feelings*."

"Billy's seventeen. Is he going to be tried as an adult, or—"

Hopper stares at him, wearing an expression of mingled disbelief and frustration. He lifts his hands and folds them across his chest—authoritative, adult-speak for *I'm bigger than you, I'm smarter than you, and you better listen to me*. "Hargrove's fate is in the hands of a county judge. Not your concern, Harrington," he says. "You'd be wise to let that go."

Steve only flaps his tongue at him in a carnivalesque parody of Billy, grinning like a carved-out Jack-o'-lantern. "Let *what* go?"

"Steve—" Jonathan begins.

"You know what I'm talkin' about," Hopper growls. "*Let it go*, Steve. When a vicious dog bites you, you don't keep trying to pat it on the head. You become afraid of that dog. Hargrove nearly killed a grown man, for Christ's sake. He nearly killed *you*."

*And then he put me back together again*, Steve almost says. He wonders if this is also how Billy felt when he came to school late on that final, apocalyptic day: like he was splitting apart at the seams, unraveling thread by thread. Feeling like the slightest push—a gust of wind—would send him tumbling, screaming into the senseless void.

"Billy's not a dog," he mutters, and Hopper just shakes his head, like he knows a lost cause when he sees one.

"I'm keeping you here until I get word from Healey's family. If this blows over, Harrington, I don't want to see your face for the rest of the year. I mean it—if you get into any more fucking fights, so help me God—"

"You won't see us," Jonathan says hastily. "Scout's honor."

Hopper makes a face at that, as if to say, *some honor*. "I better not. I've already got one wild child to deal with, I don't need any more."

As the sound of Hopper's footsteps leave them, Steve stares straight ahead, at the light that burns just outside the cell. He's still bleeding, although not as badly as he was when the Demodog bit him. Old scars, now. The pulse of blood from his nose is sluggish, heavy; Billy would know what to do about that, too. *His dad beats him*, Jasmine Stewart whispers in his memory. The way she'd sounded—like she was desperately trying to hold back laughter. Big bad Billy Hargrove—not so bad at home, apparently.

Steve spits a goblet of blood into his palm and wipes it on his shirt. "He's not a dog," he says to the light, and his voice sounds small, destitute. He's not sure who he's trying to convince, but it feels important that he say it, just to get it out in the open.

"I don't know what to tell you, man," says Jonathan.

\*

Tommy never presses charges. He doesn't need to. He's already gotten what he wanted from Steve—and Steve's happy to give it to him. (Billy's rubbed off on him in the worst way; given him an appetite for destruction he can't quite sate.)

Once the dust settles, Steve finds himself in limbo, not being able to move forwards or back.

It's all too familiar. When Nancy had called him *bullshit*, and Steve hadn't known whether they were broken up or if he was supposed to come crawling back to her and prove himself, 'cause that's what happens in the movies—in the movies, women don't know what they want, they need a guy to tell them. Overthinking about overthinking—that's his problem, but he can't help it. It's that feeling of *not-knowing* that really gets under his fucking skin, an itch he can't scratch.

In Billy's absence, the not-knowing is worse; it's either life or death, prison or not prison. Steve speculates in the days that pass after Hopper releases him and Jonathan from the holding cells, and it feels like the whole of Hawkins is speculating along with him, but not like they *care* what happens to Billy—but like his life is a car crash happening in slow motion, and they're placing bets on who's gonna

make it out alive, and who's gonna burn.

Steve can't stand it. The *itch*, the—the walls of Hawkins itself, closing in on him like that scene in *A New Hope* where Luke and Leia and Han are trapped in the trash compactor.

When Jane finds him, it's twenty-eight days, six hundred and seventy-two hours, thirty-one thousand, nine hundred and twenty minutes, and about two million seconds—give or take—after Billy slammed Principal Whitechurch's face into the curb of the school parking lot. Outside, away from prying eyes and the whispered insults that keep getting thrown his way, sneers of *King Faggot*. Eel Race River is good for that, when he needs some fucking peace and quiet. When he needs to scratch the itch.

"Don't turn your back," is all she tells him. Jane doesn't have to ask what he's doing there, and he's fucking glad. He's tired of trying to explain himself to people, when he doesn't even understand. Tired of apologies.

Steve's pulling his mom's yellow dish washing gloves on over his hands, hissing through his teeth as water, bitingly cold, floods the insides of his Nikes. "I wasn't going to."

"Do you promise?"

Jane takes that word very seriously, Steve knows; all the kids do. A promise, according to Party philosophy, is akin to a binding legal contract. He balances the second glove on his shoulder while he holds out the hand that's still bare: "You wanna spit on it?"

She frowns in disapproval. "Pinkie," she suggests, and pulls back the sleeve of her long coat to link her little finger with his.

"Stand back, okay?" Steve says. "This could end badly."

"It won't," she says, with a knowing, confident smile, and then she's turning and clambering back over the rocks to the riverbank, folding her legs up underneath her as she plonks down onto the sand.

Steve can't help himself, even though he knows that Jane Hopper is the last person who needs protection from monsters in the woods.

Monsters in the water, now. “You know what, maybe I should take you home.”

“It’s okay,” she says brightly. “Jim’s working.”

“If Hopper finds out you’re here, he’ll kill me. Friends don’t lie, Jane.”

“*You’re* my friend.” Her voice is quiet, but firm. “You can’t be alone.”

“I’m not alone,” he protests, indignant, but she doesn’t seem to hear him; her arms are crossed over her chest in an uncanny impersonation of her adoptive father.

“You can’t make me go.”

“I would if I could,” he says, with a sigh. “Aren’t you supposed to be in school, or something?”

“It’s Saturday.”

“Shit.” Steve could’ve sworn it was Friday—that makes it another one thousand four hundred and forty minutes post-Billy. He’s starting to see his life divided into two chapters: one defined by Barb’s death, and one defined by Billy. He’s not sure if the thought is a comforting one, or just plain pathetic.

“Let’s play,” Jane says. Her voice, still quiet, spurs him into action, and Steve pulls on the other rubber glove with a muffled smacking noise. Tries not to think of the fact that the sound doesn’t echo, when it should; it just disappears into the trees, as if absorbed by them. How off that is.

He shoves his hands into the bucket, pulling up strings of raw meat and scattering them into the swirling black waters below. Chum, to draw sharks; Steve hopes it’s a big shark this time. He’s itching for a fight, itching for something that’ll warm his blood in the way Billy’s body used to, when it was pressed inside him. Raking him over the coals, consuming him in the way that only fire in human form can.

“Incoming,” Jane says.

Steve has a sudden, nostalgic flashback to his Little League days, of endless summers where his dad would take him to this very spot to knock a ball back and forth across the water. He's always been a better baseball player, in all honesty—it's a game that lets him be light and quick on his feet, so different from basketball. Water, not fire.

Drawn by the scent of blood, the Demodog erupts from the river with an unearthly, buzzing howl, spraying water and mud in every direction. Its skin, gleaming wet and shiny like a lizard's, is black and rotten-looking, the color of a creature that's only ever known the dark and the cold all its life; the petals of its face unfurl piece by awful piece as it studies him—as if it's saying, *I know you*.

"You fucker," Steve says. He twirls the baseball bat in his wrist, like he's stepping up to the plate, then drives the nails straight into the 'dog's throat. He pictures his dad standing on the periphery, mitt raised over his head and the sunlight flashing off his glasses: *sa-wing, batter!*

Steve doesn't give the Demodog a chance to get back up; he brings the bat down, swinging until the muscles in his arms are screaming in protest and his breath is coming in frenzied, whooping gasps, until the creature's head looks like a piece of fruit that's gone rotten in the sun.

"Hole in one," Jane remarks.

"That's golf," he says. When he turns around, bat dripping 'dog brains and black goo, Jane's frowning again, her head tilting from side to side like a satellite dish that's trying to triangulate the correct signal.

"Oh," she says. "Home run?"

Steve smiles at her, but it feels more like he's grimacing. "You got it, babe."

Jane climbs to her feet and skips back to where he's standing. Carefully avoiding the water that makes a grab for her sneakers; Steve doesn't blame her. He doesn't like the water either, not anymore, but *someone* has to be the adult here.

She peers into the cleft between the rocks where the Demodog had made its home, a hollow in the riverbed that looks more like a well—a wishing well with no end in sight. Toss a coin in, and you'd never hear it strike the bottom. Steve pictures a warren of tunnels, twisting and turning like the passageways of a maze: leading deep under the Earth, getting more and more upside-down and inside-out with every step.

“Jane, get back,” he says warningly, reaching out to grab her by the elbow, “it’s not safe—”

Jane plants her fist onto the rock, pressing until a trickle of blood bursts from her left nostril and the ground shakes as if caught in the grips of an earthquake, water gurgling and spurting into the sky above their heads like a burst pipe. Steve promptly forgets all about being the adult: he stands still and watches, light-headed, as the hollow is slowly crushed underneath the force of several hundred tons of river water, stone, and mud. *She's just a kid*, he reminds himself, awed. Fearful, too.

Always fear, prowling—but that's what he has his bat for.

Jane stands up, scrubbing the blood from her lip absently. “Game over,” she says, simply. Like she hadn’t just taken possession of the elements with a crook of her finger. Yeah, no big deal.

“Not yet,” he says, recovering a little. “There’s more.”

She nods, business-like. “Strays. You’ll need help.”

Steve scoffs, but it’s flimsy, his resolve. Traipsing through the woods playing Whac-a-Gorgon with a thirteen-year-old psychic is not how he expected to spend his summer, but he supposes it’s better than doing it alone, which—okay, so he *is* alone, but that doesn’t mean he’s *lonely*, Jesus, it’s not *that fucking bad*. Is it?

“How’d you even know I was here?” he demands.

“I *heard* you.” Jane twirls her finger next to her ear. “You’re loud.” When Steve’s silent, thinking—thinking *what the hell* is he even supposed to say in response to that—she continues softly, “You need

a lot of things. You need it to be okay.”

“It’s not, though.” His voice comes out rougher than he intended. “Get out of my head, Jane. It’s—it’s grown-up stuff. None of your beeswax.”

“It *is*,” she insists. “Max is my friend, too.”

Steve feels his throat close up. “Yeah? Have you—have you heard anything?”

He doesn’t—won’t say Billy’s name out loud. They’re meant to be a secret, like all the stuff with the lab and Barb’s death is a secret; the worst kept secret in Hawkins, as it turns out.

“Can’t,” she says. “Consequences. People will hurt.”

“What people?” Steve says at once, but his mind is already plucking at the stray threads: *his dad beats him*, he hears Jasmine Stewart say in between barely-repressed giggles—a sentence that’s so fucking off it’s not even funny.

Jane is looking at him like she can hear the laughter, too. “It’s going to be dark soon,” she says. “We’ll stay. Have to be sure.”

Before he can question her further, she’s heading back to the shore, coattails flapping in the wind that’s started to rise upstream, bringing with it a cloying, yellow smell—the smell of rotting leaves. He looks down at his filthy gloves, as if the answer can be found amongst the red-brown streaks of pig’s blood.

The campsite is another childhood memory, a plateau that overlooks a fork in the river. It’s a far cry from the Harrington manor, but Steve would happily trade his parents’ house for a lifetime out in the woods. Living off the land. Being his own man. Roasting s’mores and telling ghost stories and star-gazing. All that shit they drilled into you as a Boy Scout still strikes a chord with the part of him that’s deeply romantic, sentimental.

“I bet you’ve never camped before, huh?” he says, as Jane circles the remains of his fire warily, like it’s going to come alive and bite her.

“Jim camped,” she says. “When he was as tall as me.”

Her sneaker touches the corner of the book he’d left open on the ground before going off to hunt: *Greek Mythology for Dummies*. Her head’s doing that weird sideways tilt again. Tuning into his thoughts like he’s a goddamn radio station.

“You read a lot.”

He rubs the back of his neck, uncomfortable. “I try.”

Jane picks up the book, flips through it. “There are good words and bad words.” She sounds a little sad. “Some that come nice, some that don’t. Aren’t there?”

“Green words,” Steve says. “Green words are nice.”

“Jim says it’s hard, because my—my dev-dev-development is—is stunted.” Her mouth moves with deliberate purpose, trying not to stumble around the complex combinations of letters; a lock she can’t quite unpick. Not with her mind, as awe-inspiring as it is. “It’s not normal, like kids are.”

“You speak good,” Steve says, and she blushes.

“I’d like to *read* good. I don’t want the words to be bad. They aren’t. There are worse things.” She closes *Greek Mythology for Dummies* with a snap, then looks up at him, her wide, oil-drop eyes roving over his face. “You read good.”

“I dunno about that.” He’s only good when Billy’s around; when Billy’s lying next to him in the half-darkness of Steve’s room, his smile white and smooth as porcelain and his fingers playing with Steve’s hair, gentle then rough as the light changes and Steve’s clambering on top of him, all bad words—all words in general—forgotten.

“Will you read to me?”

Steve thinks of Mr. Aird, leaning against his desk: *the room’s all yours, Mr. Harrington*. The memory is enough to make a flush of humiliation gather hotly on the back of his neck. He knows what it’s like to be

laughed at for something you can't control; it's number two on his list of top five worst fucking feelings in the world. "I don't think I can—"

Jane smiles that confident, knowing smile again. "You can."

\*

It becomes routine, post-Billy. Not that Steve could ever extricate Jane from him, even if he did tell Hopper; once Jane decides she's going to do something, she sticks to it like gum sticks to your shoe.

They both know he's not going to tell Hopper, anyway. Steve *needs* an outlet, just like a heroin addict needs his next needle. It's now an entire two months since Billy vanished inside a police cruiser (fourteen hundred and forty hours, eighty-seven thousand, six hundred minutes, and nearly six million seconds, in case you're wondering) and Steve's given up on the phone call. The school term ends with Billy's name disappearing from the spot above Steve's on the class roll call. Like he was never there at all.

It almost feels like someone's died. Steve's read about phantom limbs, how their owners can feel them long after they've been cut off. Like all scars, Billy still talks to him; he's incessant, like a dripping faucet. Once, it had been Barb who would talk to him—Barb who he'd see in every shadow, every Demodog corpse, her eyes warm and shy behind her thick glasses. The ugly truth about grief: after a while, you start to forget the face of the person you're supposed to be grieving for.

Not Billy. Maybe it's the lack of closure that keeps him alive in Steve's mind—the lack of a body. The Billy in Steve's mind never fucking shuts up, just like he never shuts up in real life; when Steve returns from his trips to the river, covered in dried monster blood and mud and sweat, every bone in his body aching, he tricks himself into thinking Billy's going to be waiting for him when he walks through the front door, his gaze half admiring, half a dare as he looks Steve up and down: *any hole's a goal, Steverino*. A flash of yellow sunlight becomes blonde hair—something moving in the corner of his eye, there and gone again.

He doesn't go upstairs.

“I can’t fuck you when Albert Einstein’s lookin’ at me,” Billy had told him, a mere three days before The Incident. He’d seemed fine then—that’s what kills Steve the most. Billy had seemed *happy*. Not even close to crazy, not even close to snapping. Billy had seemed like the kind of happy that comes with *forever*.

They’d been in Steve’s room—safe haven, where the monsters can’t reach them—Billy’s leather jacket thrown over Steve’s bed post, sleeve spotted with remnants of dried blood, because Billy was right about not getting the stains out, he’s *always* right. The air had been hazy with the pot they’d smoked, Steve remembers; the kind of potent bud Billy called a ‘good giggle’. They’d laughed a lot, in the soft, hazy safety of Steve’s room. Sometimes, Billy didn’t need to be high to have a good giggle. Sometimes, the laughter came naturally.

“What do you mean? Einstein’s a silver fox,” Steve had said. “Are you tellin’ me that luscious ‘stache doesn’t get your motor running?”

They both groaned as Billy slid into Steve, mouths coming together to lick and bite desperately at one another, the heat of their bodies oppressive, cocoon-like. It’s perpetually desperate, like they’re teetering on some jagged precipice. Steve hadn’t known then but maybe Billy had been able to sense it, the way some animals can sense when catastrophe looms on the horizon.

“Fuck, babe,” Billy had gasped out; his curls had rested against Steve’s shoulder as he moved, slipping in and out with intoxicating slowness. Then he’d stopped. “Fuck. I can’t. It’s *weird*, Steve—you ever think about how fuckin’ weird it is that Albert Einstein watches you *sleep*?”

Steve had reached up on a whim. Billy had gone utterly still when he touched him, but he hadn’t brushed Steve’s hand away, and in Billy-speak, that meant, *keep going*. Steve had reached up, pulling tight at the chain of Billy’s necklace. “Look at me,” he’d said, and tightened his grip so that the charm caught the light, shone like liquid metal.

(It makes Steve wonder if he’d been viewing the first half of the year with a different pair of eyes; seeing only what he wanted to see. Billy Hargrove’s fucking crazy, they say; Billy needs a muzzle, they say, because he almost killed someone—no, *savaged* them. Like a rabid

dog. Steve Harrington's stupid, they say, too. They call him mush mouth, because he gets his words confused sometimes and he can't read in front of the class without feeling like he's gonna hurl, they're just *words*, for Christ's sake. Billy never hit Steve again after that night in November, and he never called Steve stupid, either, so somehow, Steve thought this meant something—but what if he's wrong? What if he'd just been dreaming all this time of a Billy who was gentle, a Billy who was kind, a Billy who was forever—but does Steve really, truly know what Billy was? Or is 'Billy' just his mind filling in the blanks for him, showing him only what he wanted to see?)

(It is these thoughts, and not the Demodogs, that will keep Steve up night after night in the aftermath, like a man pawing through the washed-up remains of a sunken ship, trying to reconcile what he's lost with what he has left.)

The necklace is still there, cradled inside the ashtray that's on his nightstand. Along with Billy's leather jacket, the last beers he ever drank, the sheets on Steve's bed still twisted into a vague Billy-like shape. Along with Billy's smell, which is something like beer and cigarettes, of course, but also something a little deeper—primal, volcanic.

His room *is* Billy—a living, breathing presence that's taken over the top floor of his parents' house, smoldering away in the dark. Steve doesn't dare disturb it. Forgetting Barb is one thing—he can't fucking *stand* the thought of forgetting Billy, who's so much larger than life. The type of ghost to leave marks.

It's been two months, and Steve doesn't go upstairs, doesn't step back inside his room to open the window or change the sheets or empty the beer cans from his wastepaper basket, because that's *their* space, the space where Billy let him fuck him for the first time, where Billy let him love him. Billy hurt him—Billy broke his heart, but that space is still hallowed ground.

Instead, Steve sleeps downstairs, in front of the fireplace. No Albert Einstein to watch over him there, telling him he puts the sexy in dyslexia. Nancy had gotten the poster for him while she was in New York; she'd thought it was funny, but also important, because

Einstein was dyslexic *and* a genius, and that means that it's not all bad for Steve, he can still pass English. She said that she doesn't want him to be ashamed, but the thing is, Steve never used to be ashamed. It's other people who make him feel that way, people like his dad, who tells him that he doesn't want him to go to college, he can't see him go through that, doesn't he know how difficult it is for people like him, people who are—*impaired* is the word Dad had used, but Steve knows he'd really meant to say *retarded*. It's that kind of well-meaning concern that's actually super patronizing, and yeah, sometimes Nancy could be like his dad, too.

Steve doesn't want to be a genius. He wants to be him, just *Steve*.

He thought that would be good enough for his dad, for Nancy—for Billy. A-OK, just peachy. He was wrong.

God, he's always so fucking *wrong* about everything.

He has visitors. Claudia Henderson stops by one evening to drop off a sample of her infamous double-tiered mud cake, a favorite among Dustin's friends—fixing him with a watchful eye as she presses the container into his hands, and Steve can only think of it as the look all moms must give their sons from time to time. As a young male who mostly lives alone, he draws all of the concerned moms in town like bees to honey, middle-aged women looking to dig their claws into something, anything they can take care of; after Mrs. Henderson comes Karen Wheeler, then Audrey Sinclair, then, finally, Joyce Byers.

“How are you holding up?” The first thing Joyce does is pull all the blinds up on the windows, so that the ground floor is flooded with daylight and Steve’s blinking confusedly in his kitchen like he can’t quite remember how he got there. The next thing she does is boil water for tea.

“What do you mean?”

He doesn’t like the way she’s looking at him—like she can see right through him. It’s the same way Jane looks at him sometimes, and it’s unnerving.

“You put on a brave face,” Joyce says, “and I’m worried about you. Fighting’s not your style, Steve.”

“My style?”

“You’re a lover, not a fighter,” she says sagely. “Would you like milk?”

“Yes please,” he says, and she reaches down to pull a bottle from her hand bag; the milk in Steve’s fridge has curdled. Steve watches her pour it for him, thinking about that word, that oddly heavy word: love.

Love, love, love. Funny how words can seem meaningless the longer you look at them, the more you turn them over in your mind in a search for meaning. Steve’s pretty sure that’s called irony, or something.

He startles when her hand reaches across to land on his. “It’s really cruel,” Joyce says quietly, “to have it all snatched away from you, just when you’re at your happiest.”

Steve raises his mug of tea to his lips with fingers that badly want to shake. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he says; he can’t remember if he’s ever had the chance to say that to her face. Bob’s funeral, Barb’s funeral—they both happened within such close proximity to one another. *Too close*, for a small town.

“I have good days,” she admits, “bad ones, too. They’re the hardest. Days where Jon has to get me out of bed because I can’t even do it myself. That’s when I have to think about what Bob would want, if he were still ...”

“Yeah,” Steve says, and she blinks rapidly for a couple of seconds, like she’s got something in her eye. Steve doesn’t say anything, just holds her hand and listens to the sound of her breath waxing and waning.

“Well,” Joyce continues. “Moral of the story is, he spent every day of his life trying to make me happy, and I have to remind myself that he’d hate to see me otherwise, y’know? Tea also helps,” she adds,

because the mug is still hovering in front of Steve's mouth, not moving, "it's very calming."

"You got anymore?" he says. Joyce beams at him, bending to fish a handful of boxes out of her bag: English breakfast, chamomile, Japanese green. She has snacks, too, potato chips and chocolates and ice cream, as well as a Tupperware container of mac 'n' cheese casserole that has bacon bits baked into the crust, just the way he likes it, and bedraggled copies of *Enter the Dragon*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which is like, the holy trinity of fucking fantastic movies, in Steve's humble opinion.

"This is called being kind to yourself," Joyce informs him as she spreads these treasures across the table in a neat row. "Which you need to be doing more of. You're only human, sweetheart."

He doesn't know what to say; he's overwhelmed, dumbfounded that she's gone out of her way for him like this. "How—how did you know?"

"I had help," she says, with a wink. "There's a lot of people out there who care about you, Steve. Don't ever forget that, no matter how tempting it is. Okay?"

"O—okay."

"The mac 'n' cheese needs only about half an hour in the oven before it's good to go." Joyce pauses as she stands up, hesitating. "Can I have a hug?"

He lets her wrap her arms around his chest; it's like holding a baby bird, small and fragile. But he understands that there's other ways of being strong than just the physical—and Joyce Byers is perhaps one of the strongest people he knows. She smiles at him, watery, then says: "Bob used to tell me, 'Joyce, you got the blues. That's okay. The blues pass, I promise. You just gotta be kind to yourself.' And he was right. It *all* passes, Steve. Life goes on."

"Thank you, Joyce, really, jeez, this is just. Wow—" he stammers, feeling terribly inadequate, but Joyce just puts a hand on his cheek, like he's not. It means more than he can possibly articulate.

That's a weird way of putting it, Steve thinks, as he pads back into the living room, listening to the way the house settles around the silence, pipes creaking and moving like old bones. Weird to say, 'you got the blues', when someone's sad.

Sadness, to him, doesn't look blue. Blue, to him, is the color of life; it's the color of Billy's denim jacket, of his Camaro, his eyes, the way they look in the moonlight, so blue they're almost purple. It's the color of an ocean he's never seen, only can imagine, from what he's been told about it. Blue, for Billy.

The color of sadness to Steve Harrington is white. White, the same color of his mom's walls. Steve stares at these walls all night long when he can't sleep, cassette player droning away in the background until the tape reaches the end and it starts flickering and stuttering, like a dead TV channel.

He's always thought his house is too big for three people—by himself, though, it's positively endless. White walls for days, empty. No one home. Steve's just a part of the furniture, now.

## 2. Chapter 2

II

*You promised. Eligible bachelor. Kubler-Ross model. Little doll. Trip-trap.*

“I don’t understand,” Jane says, out of breath.

Steve stops walking so that she can catch up to him. She’s red and sweaty, hair disheveled; mud spattered all over her sneakers, which lost their pristine white color a long time ago. *Hop’s gonna kill me*, Steve thinks, not for the first time. “*You sure you don’t want me to drive you home?*”

Jane just screws her face up like he’s started speaking a foreign language. Steve sighs, popping open the cap on his water bottle. “Well, Persephone ate the pomegranate, right?” he says. “Six seeds. Every seed was a month she had to stay in Hades—”

“Yes,” Jane says, “*I understand*, but a—a—”

She breaks off, staring at him almost furiously, her cheeks turning even redder under his scrutiny.

“A pomegranate?” he prompts, gently. It’s a big word; another big word she’s getting used to, although she’s a much faster learner than he is.

“It’s not a bad word,” she says, face scrunched up again. “Is it?”

“I don’t think so. It’s just a fruit.” Steve bends to pluck a broken branch off the path, thinking of the only passage from the Songs of Solomon he can still remember: *thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks*. “I once knew this Rabbi who swore up and down that a pomegranate was what Eve ate, in the Garden of Eden.”

“Rabbi?”

“Like a teacher,” he explains, and her face goes slack. “Jane?”

“Steven,” she mutters; her voice is low, slurred. Like she’s asleep. “Steverino. King. Heir. *Darling one.*”

“Jane,” he says again, uneasy. When she doesn’t answer—when she just stands there, her mouth hanging open and her gaze distant, drifting in some faraway place he can’t even see, will never be able to see—he reaches out and gives her shoulder a shake. Just a little one, cautious; he’s read somewhere that you’re not meant to scare sleepwalkers into waking.

Jane quivers under his touch, her head jolting forwards and her eyes blinking owlishly. “Oh,” she says. “*Oh.*”

“Christ, this has gotta stop,” Steve says. “Time-out on the mind-reading, okay? You want a bad word, *that’s a bad word, Jane.*”

“I know,” she whispers, wringing her hands. “I’m sorry. It’s just—”

“We talked about this. Let me deal with my shit. You’re gonna hurt yourself, otherwise.”

“I’m *fine,*” Jane says, but Steve doesn’t believe her. These days his mind feels like a pit that’s filled with knives, thoughts big and small cutting into him and drawing blood, but that’s A-OK, that’s peachy, he’s dealing with it. He just doesn’t want anyone else to stumble into that death trap, no sir. There are things in this world that not even a nail bat or super powers can shield from.

“When we get back, I’m gonna get you a pair of ear plugs,” he says. The branch in his hands is slimy from the rain, covered in moss. Steve wipes it on his shirt thoughtfully; it’s a decent-sized piece of wood, perfect for carving. Maybe he could carve something, if he finds his old hunting knife—

“Carve what?” Jane says, and he flinches a little, as if goosed.

“Nothing.” Steve tosses the branch into the trees, ignoring the momentary pang of regret that shoots through him. He hasn’t carved anything since he was about ten years old, when his dad sat him down and told him, in that cajoling, buddy-buddy way of his: *c’mon,*

*champ, you really think carpenters are on six-figure salaries? “It’s nothing.”*

It's early August, and the unseasonal rain has turned the woods around Hawkins into a slow-moving swamp. It makes walking hard going, but Jane's a good sport, despite the wet and the mess; she puts the tent up all by herself and takes it down when they leave, and can even light the fire using Steve's flint and striker. It's gotten to a point where Steve's grateful for her company—where he almost can't imagine doing this without her, because aside from covering for him, she's also what's kept him from falling headfirst into that pit of knives. It's nice, not feeling so alone all the time.

Not that he's *lonely*.

They only ever stay for one night, not long enough for anyone to notice something's up. Jane tells Hopper that she's at Mike's place, and she tells Mike that she's staying at Jim's. '*Friends don't lie*' is the quintessential code of conduct of The Party, yet Jane's lying to everyone for Steve. Steve tells her it's for a good cause; once the weather clears up, Eel Race River is going to be swarming with families, choice pickings for any strays in the water. The ugly truth: Steve's intentions aren't entirely noble. That's why Jane lies for him. Why they haven't told anyone about the leftover Demodogs yet.

“Do you remember your promise?” Jane says, as the trail starts to slope down.

“Do you remember *yours*? Bit hypocritical to lecture me, don’t you think?”

“Life and death,” she points out, unperturbed. “Don’t turn your back.”

“You’re fucking unbelievable,” Steve grumbles, but he hands her the water bottle so she can take a much-needed sip from it.

Jane's eyes move across the patchwork quilt of trees above them and he knows that she's thinking the same thing: that where they can usually hear animals rustling in the undergrowth, the sigh of the wind in the trees, or the cries of birds, there are none. It's silent,

except for the sound of running water. Persephone was swept into the Underworld by Hades, and the land wept for her. “This is the place.”

“Yeah,” he says. Jane draws close to him as he unslings the baseball bat from his rucksack. You need a stake to kill a vampire, Steve thinks suddenly, mindlessly. Or is it a silver bullet? Dustin would know. He makes a mental note to ask him, when it’s all over. When he’s had his fill. One more—one more ‘dog, then he’ll stop. *Then* he’ll sleep.

That’s off, too. Steve’s never been a guy with too many vices, or baggage. He was a simple creature before Barb died, comprised of simple wants and needs—and he prided himself on that. Somehow, it all became distorted along the way, the individual threads all tangled up and snagged like yards of fishing line.

Then again, everything’s distorted in Hawkins—everything from the light that’s shining down on them through the trees, greasy and jaundiced, to the smell of rotting vegetation, of a sickness that’s eating everything from the inside out like a bad apple.

*Had his fill*—he sounds like Billy, Christ. Like attracts like.

“Heeeeeeeeeyyyyy, batter, batter, batter,” Jane sing-songs as Steve drops the chum into the water. “Sa-wing, batter, batter, batter.”

He puts a hand on his hip. “What are you doing?”

Jane cocks her head, looking impish. “Sa-wing, batter,” she says, miming swinging a bat with her hands. “It’s what you say. At the start.”

“Well, yeah.” Steve doesn’t even know where she picked up the chant from; he never taught it to her. That’s how Jane is sometimes. She’ll pick up words and phrases like they’re bits of flotsam and jetsam drifting along the seafloor, drawing them in with her ‘feelers’—Dustin’s word for telepathy, mind-reading, whatever the fuck. It’s not one of those things that Steve thinks he’ll ever get used to, no matter how much time he spends with her. “But this isn’t a game, Jane. You fuck around like that, you could get yourself killed.”

(*Wicked way of the world*, he hears Billy whisper in the back of his brain. Nestled deep within the recesses of his amygdala, that tiny, unassuming cluster of neurons that links memory, pleasure ... aggression.)

“I don’t need a babysitter,” she says, and Steve laughs out loud.

“You’re twelve.”

“Thirteen,” she corrects him, like that settles things. “Oh—incoming.”

The water in front of Steve has started to bubble and foam and rise, lapping at his sneakers in oily, black waves—shuddering, he backs away across the riverbank, gripping the baseball bat with both hands as the water continues to boil and shift and become faceless, unspeakable. The Demodog springs out of the mud like the world’s most fucked up jack-in-the-box, its snout snapping open to hiss wetly at him.

There’s not a lot of things Steve Harrington understands, but this—the swing and wet, heavy *thunk* of nails slicing through monster hide and tendon and bone—is easy. Green.

“Better?” Jane asks him, when it’s over.

Steve stares down at the ‘dog lying vanquished at his feet. A dead Demodog is better than none, sure, but it doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t whisk all the people they’ve lost back to the land of the living, like Dorothy back to Kansas. Steve’s always been an optimist, though.

“What do you think?” he answers. Reaches down to tug the bat from where it’s lodged in the thing’s side—frowning when he meets some resistance. He must’ve put too much strength in his swing, but he can’t really remember; it always happens so quick, he gets too worked up.

It’s only for a half-second that Steve turns his back on the water, but it’s a half-second that almost kills him.

Jane cries out a warning, but before he can move something barrels into him with the force of a fucking runaway train. Steve staggers,

ground flying up to meet his face—throws out his hands to stop himself from knocking his teeth out on the rocks. The fall skins the surface of his palms, the pain bursting in his nerves like shooting stars, red and raw and ragged.

The second Demodog shrieks in his ear—the smell of it is nauseating, like an open grave. It's got him pinned, claws digging into his shirt, tearing it to ribbons. Mouths splayed wide so that Steve can see down the back of its throat, a portal straight to hell, and all he can think is: *this is what Bob Newby saw before he died.*

He's not afraid. The fear's removed itself entirely, gone into a separate room, and in its place Steve only feels numb elation. He understands why Billy does it now; why Billy chases his own mortality so relentlessly. It's godly, being able to look death in the eye, to come face to face with your own maker—

Separate, in the final moments. Steve's separate from his fear when he kills a Demodog; the act itself is an exorcism to fear, to all his grief and his pain and his fury, and so is this, too: he's separate, watching from above and beyond as the 'dog leans down to bite his head clean off.

"*No!*" he hears Jane scream.

The Demodog shudders. Then, right before Steve's eyes, it starts to shrivel—falling apart like a dying flower, skin sloughing off its bones in black strips, teeth popping out of its gums and bouncing off the rocks around him with sick clacking noises, like bits of children's Lego—it's still shrieking, but it's a sound of agony, not hunger; a sound that raises the hairs on the back of his neck, yowling and ghastly, Jane's flaying it *alive*—

"Stop, Jane!" he shouts finally. "Jesus—stop, stop, STOP! It's dead already!"

Jane lowers her hand and the 'dog drops, with a loud splash, into the river. It doesn't come back up.

"Jesus," Steve says again. He tries to get up, but all he accomplishes is a confused flailing of his legs. His bloody hands are curled against

his chest, stinging and burning; he thinks something in his ribs might be bruised or broken, it doesn't feel right, the way his breath is getting stuck in his lungs. "Was that really necessary?"

Jane is absolutely livid. She's on him in an instant, beating at his chest with her fists. "You—you *promised!*"

"It's a bit hard when there's more than—"

"Too dangerous!" she seethes. "We'll go back. Get Jim—"

"Oh, so *now* you want to get Hopper?" he demands. Jane doesn't bother with a retort, just scrambles to her feet and starts walking back up the path. "Hey, hey, hey! Where d'you think you're going, huh?"

"I can't let you do this to yourself," she says, and Steve feels his hackles rise. Who said anything about *let*? He's the goddamn adult here, not her.

"I don't need your permission," he snaps; she just rolls her eyes. "What the fuck's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You're—you're—" Jane's mouth stalls as she struggles to find the right word. "You're reckless!"

"Jane—"

"Steve." Jane suddenly sighs, the anger in her eyes fading to something else entirely as she looks him up and down. Something like love. "You want to get hurt," she says, in a calmer voice. "You want *to* hurt."

The pain in his hands is suddenly unbearable; Steve squeezes his eyes shut, counts to three, then opens them. Jane's pale, pinched face stares down at him, but hers is the only one. No Barb, no Billy.

He can't lie to her. If it were Dustin or Mike or Lucas, he would. He'd lie, even though friends don't lie—Steve's their friend, sure, but he's also an adult, someone *responsible*. Part of being an adult is lying to kids to protect them, because they're just *children*, and the world is a wicked, hungry, mean old thing that'll chew them up and spit them

back out if he's not careful. If he's not there for them.

Jane's not a child. She looks like one, but her childhood was ripped away from her by government-sanctioned men in lab coats and sealed inside a padded room to be experimented on, to be zapped and restrained and beaten. Jane's seen and had more horrible things done to her than Steve can possibly imagine. He can't lie to her. She'll just read his mind anyway.

"I just want to feel something," he says dully. "I'll do whatever it takes. You can leave, if you want. I never asked you to be here."

She doesn't look angry; she just looks heartbroken. "I *can't* leave. You'll be alone."

"The way of the world." Instead of pulling himself up, he leans back, resting his head on the ground so he's looking up at the blue of the sky. Blue, that meant something to him once; that made him feel. God, Billy made him feel so fucking *much*.

Jane nudges him timidly with her sneaker. "It's getting dark. We should go."

"Not to the campsite. I'm taking you home," he says, and knows by her silence that she's not pleased with that. Not one bit.

"Will you go home?"

"Yeah, Jane. I think I will. Happy?"

"Halfway," she says. Then: "Why a pomegranate?"

"I don't know. It's symbolic."

"Symbolic?"

"Yeah. Like a metaphor." Steve pauses, eyebrows furrowing. "Wait, I think that's different. I don't know. I'm not good at that stuff. You should ask Nancy, she'll—"

"They have pomegranates in California," Jane says, and cold hands wrap themselves around Steve's chest, tightening until his voice feels

trapped, strung high and dry in his throat. “Steve. Can we—can we go to KFC?”

“Yeah,” he manages, “yeah, fuck it. Let’s go to KFC.”

He’s able to stand up without using his hands, but once he does he finds that standing was only the easy part; now he has to *walk*. The exhaustion from nights of missed sleep is back with a vengeance, hovering behind his eyelids like an uninvited guest; his knees start to give way, slowly but surely, everything melting and folding in on itself, and maybe he would’ve fallen back over if Jane hadn’t coaxed him forwards using her feelers, although he doesn’t mean to, he tries to tell her—he tries to tell her, it’s okay, save your strength for the hike back, don’t worry about me, and she just nods, blood welling from her nose as she levitates him up the riverbank, all the way back to the campsite where he left the car.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Jane says, and hell. It’s—okay, this is nice, too, being the one who’s looked after for once. Steve doesn’t get that a lot, but he wishes he did. It’s so fucking nice he wants to cry.

\*

The server girl at the KFC just outside Hawkins is wearing blue nail polish. It’s not quite the right shade of blue, but it’ll have to do. Steve stares at the color as he orders for himself and Jane, thinking of the last time he was here, when he was with Billy.

Billy had read him books but he also liked to read Steve menus, too—and Steve’s like, never had any real issue with the stuff on menus, as long as he’s not tired and they have pictures to help him, but Billy had this special talent for making the most mundane item on any menu sound like pure sex. “*They got whole chicken thighs, mi amigo,*” he’d say from across the table, fixing Steve with eyes shiny as coins, shiny with mischief, “*I’m more of a breast man, myself. The breast is juicier.*” His foot would touch Steve as he spoke, creeping up his thigh to press against his cock. Steve would squirm like a bitch in heat every time this happened, but Billy would only smile and bat his stupidly long eyelashes, as if completely guileless. As if *Steve’s* the one with a problem. But they both knew better.

Jane looks around when he slides in across from her, tray laden with chicken and fries and drinks—Coke for him, because it's not like he's gonna sleep tonight anyway, and water for her, because Hop will do worse than kill Steve if he gives Jane caffeine before her bedtime. It's fully dark outside, the sky a deep, blackened navy; still the wrong shade of blue, Steve thinks.

“Do you love him?” Jane says, and Steve pauses for a second after cracking open his Coke, listening to the soft *hiss* of escaped air.

“You’re the mind-reader, not me.”

He closes his eyes, counts to three again. He’s giving her permission; she’s never needed permission, never bothered to ask for it. For all her talk of keeping promises, Jane sure thinks she’s above it all.

When Steve opens his eyes, she’s looking back outside, up at the night sky. Black and blue, like a bruise.

“You thought you did,” she says slowly. “You thought he’d changed.”

He tilts the can to his lips and swallows a bit too quickly; the sugar burns a painful trail through his nostrils and throat. “That’s a fucking understatement,” he gasps out.

“If you love him, you can let him go, too.”

“Jane—”

“Steve,” she says, solemn. “I had to let Mike go.”

“You’re fucking *twelve*,” he hisses; his fist comes down to slam at the table but he stops himself at the last moment, suddenly ashamed. The shame makes him even angrier, for some reason. “It’s different. *Grown-up*.”

“Thirteen,” she sighs, turning her attention back to her box of spicy wings. “And it’s not. It’s the same. I—was a black hole.”

Grease runs down her wrists and her cheeks bulge outwards as she chews noisily, and Steve has the urge to tell her to get her elbows off the table and sit up straight, like a human being, not a—not a *wild*

*child.* Stops himself again, because he's pretty sure he's heard that before. Maybe they're both playing into their baser instincts here.

"Can you tell me something?"

Jane swallows around her chicken, licking at the crumbs from her fingers before lifting her gaze. Head cocked, looking at him like he's a particularly interesting piece of flotsam and jetsam she's found.

"How bad is it?" Steve quickly raises his hands in clarification before she can speak: "That's all I wanna know, I swear. Is he—"

*Dead*, is what he was going to say, but he can't—he won't say that out loud, either, because it feels like a curse. By saying it out loud, he'll make the worst he can possibly imagine come true.

"On a scale of one to ten," he continues. "Like, with one being A-OK—" he clenches his fist, turns his thumb up, "and ten being really fucking *not*." He makes his thumb go down, aiming it towards the floor so that she understands. "How bad is it?"

Jane reaches for his fries automatically and Steve, anticipating the move, pulls them away; he needs a bargaining chip here. Her eyebrows knit together and she retracts her hand, as if perplexed by this development; but her expression is distant, thoughtful, and Steve wonders where she's drifting this time. What she's picking up.

"*Papa*," she whispers, and that's all he's able to get out of her.

\*

Lita Andrews is nineteen, curvy, with a straight, white smile that suggests braces in early puberty. She's also the type of girl that his mom would call *no good*—not for a boy like Steve, golden child, well-to-do, upper-class. Steve only sees his mom for three months a year, though, so it's not like she can say for certain what would be good for a boy like him. A girl like Nancy, maybe. Probably. Nancy's all good—except for the time that she cheated on him with the same guy who beat him up, but Mrs. Harrington would never believe that. Nancy's upper-class, too; that's just not how they *behave*.

"Harrington, right?" Lita says, and Steve feels those cold hands close

around his chest again—of all the places for Billy to follow him to, Hawkins Public Library is the *last* he fucking expected.

Little reminders of Billy seem to leap out at him wherever he goes, like potholes under his feet; if Steve's not careful, not paying attention, they trip him up, make the breath go out of his lungs and set his heart racing like he's had a bad scare.

"As rain," he says, smiling at her. He thinks he manages to make it a charming smile, because she returns it. "You know me?"

"You come in here every other week, how could I not know you?" Lita's voice is husky and gravelly; she's a smoker. "I'm Lita, by the way."

"I know, I, uh, read your name tag." Her eyes are hazel, he notices. Hazel, not blue; that's an important detail. One that might not have mattered, once.

Lita leans over the reception desk, giving Steve a generous view of her cleavage. "The tapes you ordered from our Evansville branch came in," she says. "I gotta ask—how does a guy like you become interested in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*?"

"'A guy like me'? What are you trying to say, Lita?"

"Well, you know, it's just—I've heard a lot about you. You were Keg King three years in a row, right?"

Steve laughs. He can't help it; it's always the same fucking thing with these people. *Keg stands*, Jesus Christ, that's really what makes him worthy in their eyes. "Yeah, I was. In a past life."

"Heard you know how to show a girl a good time, too," she says, and the cold hands give Steve another squeeze. He understands, with sudden, brilliant clarity, that they're having two different conversations now; foreplay, in verbal form. Psychological warfare, if you will.

"Depends what she's offering," he says. He may not be the King anymore, but he can still fucking play *this* game.

Lita's hand stretches across the desk to dance over his knuckles. Her fingers are long and graceful, nothing like Billy's; where Billy's nails are square and chewed-on, Lita's nails are sharp as a cat's. They scrape gently at the hairs on Steve's wrist, turning the surface of his skin into a sea of goosebumps and he can

*(thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely)*

see the edges of a tattoo peeking out of the sleeve of her sun dress: a bird, carrying a branch of something in its beak. He doesn't think he knows any other girls with tattoos—or guys, for that matter.

*(thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks)*

"You never answered my question," Lita says. Eyes slitted and sly, watching him through curls that aren't blonde, but a bright, artificial purple. "What's up with Freud?"

Steve doesn't withdraw his hand. He keeps eye contact, noting the freckles that are just visible under her makeup. Billy had freckles, too. You had to get close to see them, though, and Billy hardly let anyone get that close unless he was going in for the kill.

"You ever had a near-death experience?"

"Are you kidding me?" Lita pulls down her collar and shows him the thin white scar on her sternum. *She wants you to know she ain't wearing a bra*, the Billy in Steve's brain tells him helpfully. Like he can't fucking see *that*. "Souvenir from my ex-boyfriend. Tried to cut me open when I said I was gonna leave, the dirtbag."

"That's heavy. Is he—"

"Oh yeah, he's in jail. But I didn't put him there. I'm no snitch. I still have my manners."

"I believe that," he says, and she laughs. Leaning closer to him so that he can smell the tobacco that's barely hidden by her flowery perfume. "Freud had this theory about like, life and death—"

"*Eros and Thanatos*," she says, and when he looks taken aback, she raps him over the knuckles with her sharp-fingered hands. "Psych

major. I'm just fucking with you, Harrington. Of course I know what Freud's deal is."

"And what's that?"

Lita's smile goes wide, almost vulpine. Steve thinks of fireworks going off above the quarry, of driving too fast and getting into too many fucking fights, traces of muscle memory found between the gaps of her straight, white teeth. "Not enough sex."

He does his best to keep his tone mild, polite. "That can really make a guy go crazy, from what I've heard."

"You heard, or you know from experience?"

The challenge is palpable in every line of Lita's body, from the way she keeps pushing her breasts insistently into his face to the hand that's still touching his wrist—and Steve's sorely tempted. *Man*, is he tempted.

Lita's reputation precedes her; according to Ronnie Redford, she used to let whole scores of guys pass her around at house parties. That could be just macho locker room posturing, though; mean-spirited, small town gossip. There's nothing the people of Hawkins enjoy more than a good old-fashioned witch hunt, scandals being turned into public spectacle.

It's another moment that feels made of glass. Steve's at a crossroads.

He and Billy never talked about being exclusive, but the thought of seeing someone else, even for a quick, fortifying fuck—is almost too much, too soon. He still has Billy's necklace rolling around in the center console of his car, for Christ's sake.

Lita's eyes are hazel, not blue, and her hands—with their sharp, manicured nails—are way too soft-looking to be getting into any sort of fight. Steve misses hands that are bruised and weeping blood. Big and ugly, cracks showing like a pane of glass that's had a brick thrown through it.

"You need me to sign for those tapes?" he says, and her smile evaporates like morning mist. There's another whiff of tobacco and

cheap perfume as she turns her back on him, almost disdainfully:

“Sure thing, *King*. I’ll grab them for you.”

*Look mom, aren’t you proud of me?* Steve thinks.

“I got a couple of friends coming down from Indianapolis on the weekend,” Lita says, when she returns from the back room with his order. “We got some poppers and E, real quality shit, not the kindergarten stuff Pete Merrill sells for twice the price behind Melvald’s. You should come, Harrington. I’ve been known to show people a good time, myself. And you look like you need it.”

“I got everything I need. Thanks, Lita.”

“Damn, what do I have to do to get a date with Hawkins’ most eligible bachelor, huh? You already got a girl waiting for you at home or somethin’?”

“I’m a man of mystery,” he says, because it’d be rude to say, sorry, I prefer blondes.

He’s never been like this; he’s never been fussy, or had a type. When he was fifteen, sixteen, he was falling haplessly in love with every girl he locked eyes with. Nancy was one of those girls, and it’s a testament to how ill-suited they were for each other.

Billy was far from perfect, but somehow, his cracks fit with Steve’s to form a semblance of the whole. Joyce Byers told him that it’d pass, that it *all* passes, but the thing is, Steve almost doesn’t want it to. He’ll forgo washing the scrim of Billy from his skin for as long as possible, until it wears him down and turns him black at the edges like old rot, crescents of dried blood you can’t quite scrub out, even if you tried.

\*

There’s not a lot Steve understands—the difference between symbolism and a metaphor being only the tip of the iceberg—but he *tries*, and that’s got to count for something, right? And besides, it’s not like he has a choice. The thing about being born a step below everybody else—being born *impaired*—is that it forces you to fight

your way up to equal footing.

In 1984, his attempts at understanding things took on a different tone. A different reason for being.

After Nancy had called him bullshit, bullshit, bullshit, after that whole freakshow with The Gate reopening and Steve meeting Jane, a girl who can *move things with her mind*, he'd found himself getting lost among the stacks at the library, reading about time travel.

It's technically possible, some scientists believe. If you can distort space in a way that it causes a wormhole to open up between dimensions, then yeah, it's *technically* possible—a one in a trillion chance. Steve hadn't meant to fall so deep down the rabbit-hole of theoretical physics; he'd only been trying to understand how the Upside-Down came to be. How *that's* even possible.

It wasn't long before he was reading about string theory, about parallel universes, reincarnation—Déjà vu's meant to be a form of reincarnation *and* time travel—about *memento mori* and terror management theory and the biblical Raising of Lazarus.

According to the philosopher Ernest Becker, it's a fear of death and dying that propels human existence, forming the root of wars, bigotry, religious worship. To deny death passage, humans seek to become immortal; to leave a handprint of themselves upon the world, so that they're never forgotten.

Steve can say with a straight face that he's not afraid of death. Really.

Not as much as he's afraid for others—for those he loves.

See, people just don't die in country towns, not at the rate they do in the cities. Hell, before '83, Hawkins was even voted Most Liveable Township this side of Indiana. Which makes it fucking nuts, completely and utterly *batshit insane*, that more people have died in Hawkins in the last two years than Steve can keep track of.

In 1984, he figured that with understanding these things came the power to control the outcome. You fear what you don't know, right? Therefore: if you *understand* something, then it becomes predictable,

and it can't hurt you.

He was wrong about that, too. If anything, Billy's taught him that control is just an illusion. You *think* you understand a situation—that this time, you're gonna say and do all the right things and your heart will stay intact, but that's not how humans work. That's not how the *universe* works. The universe isn't benevolent. It's violent and chaotic and there are—*things* that ooze between the cracks, nasty, thoughtless, *hungry*. Steve's seen these things first hand: things with flowers for faces and thin, gray air that sticks to your skin like dirty snowflakes and vines as thick as tree trunks, creeping through the veil of what's sane and known, inching closer to wrap around your ankle.

According to Sigmund Freud, Steve's caught between his life instinct, the drive to fuck and reproduce, and his death instinct, the drive to self-destruct. Every time he kills a Demodog he's reliving his trauma over and over again, processing it in a way that makes sense to him.

Or something. Freud also thought babies who aren't breastfed enough turn into sociopaths as adults, so Steve feels like he should take his credentials with a grain of salt.

The cycle of life and death; in Billy-speak, that translates to *sex, drugs, and rock n' roll*.

Billy always said living in Hawkins is like being stuck on the moon, and Steve's only just coming into terms with what he meant. The air around Eel Race River's got a funny, ashy taste to it; the same taste of the tunnels. Maybe it's always tasted like that and Steve's just never noticed; you spend your whole life in the same place, it tends to make you blind to the things that look wrong to people from the outside.

According to the Kubler-Ross model of grief, Steve's moved from the denial stage and is now wedged firmly in the bargaining stage. Which is—yeah, okay, he can see that. He's bargaining every time he kills a Demodog, as if the universe will see his sacrifice and honor it with divine reward. If only he hadn't left Barb alone by the pool that night; if only he'd known to call Billy, instead of expecting Billy to call and for it to be automatically A-OK.

If only, if only. Billy, the realist to Steve's optimist, would tell him: *life's fucked up, and then you die.* Wicked.

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It's not long before Steve gives up on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* altogether. He doesn't think it's 'cause his brain is broken—it's just a really fucking hard book to read. Even harder than *The Denial of Death*, but at least he managed to get through that one with Billy's help. Billy's not here, though, and even if he was, Steve doubts he'd view Freud with the same respect as Ernest Becker.

He debates with himself on whether he should mail the cassette tapes back to the library, or if he should just hand them back to Lita in person. Clearly, she's not a girl who's used to hearing no; maybe she thought Steve coming back week after week to the place where she works was a resounding yes.

As Steve lies awake in front of his parents' fireplace, fist loose and restless around his cock, he tries to picture what it would be like, waking up with Lita next to him. How her eyes—hazel, not blue—would look as he runs his hands across the scar on her chest, down over her nipples. Her nails would bite deep into his shoulder blades, scratch his body up worse than any Demodog—but that's why girls like Lita Andrews have long nails in the first place. So you don't forget them the next day.

In all these fantasies, Lita's eyes eventually darken to blue, and her hands curl into hard, angry fists. Hard then soft, the way Billy could be, once he let you get close. It took a while to find the right touch, the right words, but sooner or later—later, rather than sooner—Steve managed to unzip him. Billy's insides would spill out into his hands, like burning entrails through which an oracle could discern certain truths. Steve's read Jane the plays of Sophocles, but these stories are bloodier than the Greek myths; called tragedies for a reason.

Third on his list of worst feelings in the world—waking up alone in the aftermath of a broken heart. Rolling over to seek the body of someone you cared about—maybe even loved—so you can drape them over you, warm yourself inside their skin, on the sleepy words they whisper in your ear and the calming kisses they press to your

neck—and finding nothing but empty air. Sheets still mangled in an impression of a person, like the white chalk outline they draw around homicide victims.

Steve would wake from a nightmarish amalgamation of dreams and memories and Billy would always be there, on the other side of the bed. Falling back to sleep after that was easy, green.

He misses the time when things were green, just as much as he misses Billy's hands.

Jane calls him reckless, but she has no idea. Steve decides he's going to return the cassette tapes himself, in person, on a day he knows that Lita's on shift. Psychological warfare; he understands that, of all things. Billy's kept him on his toes.

He parks his car in the alley that runs parallel to Melvald's General Store and the children's playground. Checks his hair in his side mirrors self-consciously. Billy's necklace hangs from his rearview mirror, gleaming in the sunlight that's finally decided to show its face after months of rain. Steve tries not to brush against it as he gathers his nail bat from underneath the passenger seat and hides it in the back among a mountain of takeout KFC boxes, camping gear, and books. Checks his reflection one last time.

There's a flash of color through the chain-link fence as he steps out of the car, vivid, blinding; a flash of red hair. Red, for Maxine Mayfield.

And doesn't *that* throw a wrench in the works.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Max says. She's sitting on one of the swings of the children's playground, watching him, impassive.

Steve hesitates, leg jiggling. It's been three months, three *fucking* months, and he hasn't been able to get close to Max without Lucas Sinclair materializing out of thin air to tell him *back off man, this ain't your circus* like an overzealous guard dog. Lucas doesn't seem to be anywhere in the vicinity now, but—

"I thought you were someone else," he says. Leg still jiggling, as if she's some sort of live wire he's gotten too close to. Muscles bucking

and jiving, swinging wildly between fight-or-flight.

Max is still watching him. She'll be able to sense his anxiety, Steve thinks; sense it the same way Billy could look at people and track the weakness on them, like blood in the water.

He hesitates, then ducks under the fence.

It's only a Monday but Max looks like she's dressed for church: hair spilling over her shoulders in tight, girlish ringlets, the skirts of her poofy yellow dress billowing out around her like the body of an elaborate cake. In a surreal contrast to this image of feminine innocence is the cigarette twirling slowly between her lips, the wreaths of smoke curling from her nostrils in dirty gray tatters.

"Don't you know that smoking kills?"

Max's nose wrinkles as she removes the cigarette from her mouth.  
"That must be why they taste so bad."

Steve reaches across and carefully parts open the grocery bag in her lap. Schlitz beer—Billy's go-to, when he's in the mood for something light. Just a little something to take the edge off. "How did you get Don Melvald to sell you all this?"

"It wasn't hard," Max says, with another nose-wrinkle of distaste.  
"The guy's going *blind*. He thought I was Susan. Didn't see any point in correcting him."

"You're a good sister," he says.

"I could be better." She starts to cough, her eyes watering as she thumps her chest with her fist. "Ugh, gross. You want the rest of it?"

Steve holds the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger as he sucks on it slowly. "So, he's not dead," he says in quiet wonder. "How 'bout that."

"What if he was?" She peers up at him, eyes wide and sharp and serious. Steve wonders if they've been crying. Not in a way that people can see; her poker face is watertight, and that could only be a learned behavior. "Would you be sad for him?"

“You know I would be,” he says, and her mouth turns down at the corners. Just the slightest tremor. “Look—” he reaches into his pocket and pulls out Billy’s necklace, careful not to let the charm fall from the chain, “I don’t wanna cause trouble, it ain’t my circus, I get it. It just—it just doesn’t feel right, me having this.”

She makes no move to take the necklace from him. Her hands are tugging almost vindictively at the skirts of her dress, pulling at loose threads of chiffon and lace. “He’d want you to keep it, I think.”

“Max—”

“Things have changed.” The tremor in her mouth is back, her expression wavering like a candle flame. “I’m sorry, Steve. You deserve better.”

“It’s not up to you to decide what I deserve.”

“No,” she agrees, regretful. “Things *have* changed, though. Nothing I can do. I don’t make the rules. If I did, I wouldn’t be wearing *this*.”

“You look nice,” he says, and she snorts. “No—really.”

“Spot the difference.” Max hoists herself off the swing with a rattle of beer cans and turns to face him. Steve watches the torn lace of her skirt dangle and disperse, pretty as a dandelion’s head. “Aren’t I missing something?”

It slowly dawns on him. “Where’s your skateboard?”

“I’m Neil’s little doll.” She swoops low, curtseying for him; there’s something darkly sardonic about her body language, something so reminiscent of Billy that Steve almost forgets they’re only step-siblings. It’s eerie, the flashes of resemblance that pass between them sometimes. “He likes to dress me up, make me look like a proper lady. Like my mom’s a lady, y’know?”

“Ladies don’t skate?”

“Boys only,” she says, in a hard, tight voice. She suddenly rubs her eyes, like a girl who believes she’s only dreaming, that this can’t be real, surely. “Don’t tell Lucas about the cigarette. He’s never liked

Billy. I don't like him either, but—but—”

“He's your brother,” Steve says, and her hands drop away; Max's eyes are wide, staring at the sky, as if she's willing herself not to cry, don't you dare cry, *fuck*. That feeling's up high on Steve's list, too.

“Yeah. He's my *brother*.” She grabs the grocery bag back up out of the dirt, kicking disgustedly at the shredded bit of lace that's latched onto her ankle. “Anyway. Shitbird needs his medicine, or else he gets cranky—”

“Wait,” he says, trying not to sound as desperate as he suddenly feels, the well of helplessness that's yawning within him like the depths of some shadowy chasm. “Wait, Max. Please.”

He doesn't want to beg; he feels wretched, cowardly for putting it on her, she's just a fucking kid. God knows she's got enough on her shoulders already.

“If there's—if there's anything you need. Anything at all. You know you can talk to me, right?”

Max doesn't reply. She just stands with her back to him, her curled hair swaying across her back, clashing garishly with the yellow of her dress.

Steve closes his eyes and counts to ten. Opens them: no dice. Sighing, he drops the cigarette under his heel and slips Billy's necklace around his throat. The metal's warm—not ravenously hot the way fire is, but a slower, softer warmth. Like the glow of Steve's porch light, guiding them both home. Safe haven. Past tense now. Post-Billy.

He's almost at the chain-link fence when Max says, “Steverino.”

His neck cracks as he whirls around, so fast he almost falls over; his limbs suddenly feel gangly, too big for him. Max's expression is wavering again, along with her eyes—Steve thinks there might be tears gathered in the corners of them, but it's a little hard to tell; the light's shifted, the sun's gone behind a cloud.

“Thanks for caring,” she says.

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Steve waits until Max crosses back over to Mulberry Street before heading to his car, all thoughts of Lita Andrews and her long nails scratching into his back fading into nothingness.

He reckons he has about a fifteen-minute head start. Fifteen minutes, the time it takes to walk back from Mulberry Street to Cherry Road.

Billy's necklace bangs giddily against his chest like a second heartbeat as he accelerates ungracefully out of the alley, tires screeching.

Steve drives like a man in a dream; when he pulls up in front of the Hargrove's single-storey bungalow, he realizes he can't remember the drive itself, or why he decided this was a good idea in the first place.

Billy never told him much about his home life—only that his dad fought in Korea and his step-mom is a bit of a ditz, a bit of a Stepford wife. There was always a vague expression of—not quite distaste, but something close to it—on Billy's face as he talked about Susan. Like he couldn't imagine anything in the world worse than being complacent, or *compliant*.

Billy never invited him over to dinner, never introduced him, but Steve didn't expect him to. Billy never met his parents either; while Steve's an optimist, he understands there's some things in life you'll never get, no matter how much you feel like you deserve it. Dinners with parents—the kind of domestic scenes he got with Nancy, well-to-do, upper-class, *heterosexual*—are a thing he took for granted, but not anymore. He knew he'd never get it, not with Billy. Maybe if they were born in another lifetime. Another dream.

The atmosphere in Cherry Road that Monday afternoon is one of absolute domesticity, so normal for Hawkins it almost feels off. Some kid in the house next to Billy's is having a birthday party: the lawn and even the road itself is packed with people, children dancing between their parents' legs and gathering around a man in a clown suit who's handing out balloons to the revelers, and Steve has to repress a shudder. He fucking hates clowns, almost as much as he hates the water.

He checks his watch. Ten minutes.

As Steve steps onto the curb, he unexpectedly trips over another Billy-sized pothole; Jesus Christ, he thinks, his heart leaping into his mouth and his gaze wild as he looks up at the Hargrove house, with its curtained windows like closed eyes; Jesus Christ, Billy. Fucking really?

Music's coming from those eye-like windows; Steve would fucking know that guitar riff anywhere. 'Can't You Hear Me Knocking' by the Rolling Stones, Jesus fucking Christ. Okay, so Keith Richards is a god, but this—Steve doesn't know what this is, divine intervention, Déjà vu, the universe or Billy *laughing* at him, having a really great giggle at his expense or what—

"Too slow," Billy had mumbled.

They'd been sprawled in Steve's car—which was rare, because Billy never liked to be chaperoned, never neglected to tell Steve he wouldn't be caught dead in 'some prissy rich boy car—but the BMW's seats went all the way back, and the seats in the Camaro didn't, so. They compromised.

Steve's head was between Billy's legs, Billy's hands pulling the strands of his hair into crazed curlicues as Steve teased at his dick with slow, gentle drags of his tongue. 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' was playing over the speakers. Steve had seen the opportunity to educate Billy on some real fucking music and taken it; also, maybe the lyrics to 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' made him think of Billy, and maybe he wanted Billy to read between the lines and see that, but anyway. He'd been sucking Billy's dick to the Rolling Stones, and even as Billy moaned and kicked needily at the small of his back with his heels he *still* found reasons to bitch.

"Too fuckin' slow to get off to," he'd said, and whimpered when Steve released his dick back against his belly to glower at him, mouth shining with spit and pre-come.

"Without the Rolling Stones, Scorpions wouldn't even exist. The Stones started it all, man. They're pioneers."

“Pioneer my dick,” was Billy’s eloquent reply. He’d shoved Steve’s head back down and Steve had taken him to the root, throat working as he sucked and bobbed and then pulled away as soon as Billy got close. It was too slow, but he knew Billy secretly *loved* it. Billy, who was used to fucking brutal and selfish, hardly knew how to make love in the way Steve did—and whenever they did things Steve’s way, Billy would come so hard he almost blacked out, so it was this knowledge that propelled them into opposite roles, that made Billy shiver and wilt in his arms as if he were made of fragile paper.

“First time I saw you, I thought of Mick Jagger,” Steve said, coming up for air once again. Billy was a heaving, shaky mess around him; cock red and throbbing with the desire to come, to take control, take it all for himself. He wouldn’t, though; he’d be good, just for Steve.

“Yeah?” Laughter had bubbled out of Billy’s throat, down over his sweaty abdominals, all the way to Steve’s core, liquid and warm. “How so?”

“You just wouldn’t *stop*,” Steve had reached around and gripped Billy’s ankles, wrenching them away so that Billy was fully exposed, looking so edible that Steve just wanted to gulp down whole lungfuls of him until he was sick and sticky with it, “fucking *moving*.”

The way Mick Jagger moves on stage, Steve’s mom calls that *snake hips*. On Halloween, Steve had stared at the mulleted asshole who’d pushed his way over Tina’s furniture with beer dripping from his chin and mouth poised in a roguish sneer—moving like he was about to burst from his skin if he stopped. Steve hadn’t looked away, even as Billy crowded into him and Nancy huffed; he’d slipped off his Ray Bans and stared at the svelte taper of Billy’s broad shoulders into the V of his pelvis, thinking of nights when he used to jerk off furiously to the thought of seventies-era Mick Jagger and why his brain even felt it necessary to dredge that up.

Deep down, he knew why: Billy had snake hips, too. They rippled and shimmied and danced as every time he fucked and fought and laughed; snake hips, like a fucking work of art, and Steve was going, going—gone, baby.

“*YEAH, you got satin shoes ... YEAH, you got plastic boots ...*”

In the present day, Mick Jagger's scratchy growl walks with Steve all the way to Billy's front door; the song's turned up so loud he can feel the vibrations rattling the porch, spreading like slow thunder.

*"Y'all got cocaine eyes ... YEAH you got speed-freak jive ..."*

Steve raps hesitantly on the door. Tries peering through the little pane of glass at the top to see if anyone's moving inside the hall; knocks a little harder when he doesn't hear any footsteps.

He knows Billy's in there. Steve's as sure of it as he's sure of the number of fingers on his hands, as he is of the sky being blue and Lita Andrews' eyes being hazel.

*"Help me baby, ain't no stranger ... help me baby, ain't no stranger ..."*

"For fuck's sake." Steve crosses the porch to the front window. Bangs his fist on the glass loudly, like a child who's been left out in the cold. "Hargrove!" He raises his voice to a shout, because Billy's in there, he's *got to be*, Steve doesn't have anything else— "HEY, HARGROVE!"

*"Can't you hear me knockin'?"* Mick Jagger croons in his ear, like a riddle. *"Are you safe asleep? Can't you hear me knockin', yeah, down the gaslight street now?"*

Steve jumps off the porch, strides around the side of the house to where Billy's bedroom is. It sits at eye level, the ground sloping under his feet towards the back fence; Steve has to hoist himself up by the edge of the sill to get at it, just like old times. "Fuck," he says, when the window doesn't budge under his hands. "Asshole. Come on."

Something metallic catches his eye and Steve leans down to get a closer look: nails. Someone's nailed Billy's window shut.

Off, he thinks.

*"I've been begging on my knees ... I've been kickin', help me please ..."*

Steve gives the window one more shot, pounding his fists until his knuckles ache. "Come on," he hisses impatiently; not caring about how this looks to the neighbors, some random dude on Billy

Hargrove's windowsill knocking like his life depends on it. "Come on, come on, come on—"

*"Hear me prowlin', I'm gonna take you down ..."*

"YOU TRASHED MY ROOM, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" Steve hollers at the top of his lungs. His voice cracks on the last syllable and he lowers his hands, wanting to cry all over again. Weird, that he's never cried over Billy; he shed plenty of tears over Nance.

He's heavy, laden down like a rain cloud about to burst—but the tears won't come.

A horrible thought suddenly occurs to him: maybe that's his subconscious trying to tell him that it didn't mean anything, after all. That it may just be better if Steve turns around, walks back to his car, and watches Billy's house disappear in his rearview mirror, forever.

"Is that what you want?" he asks aloud, hand still splayed over the glass; his skin looks deathly white against the shiny blackness of Billy's window. "Huh? Is that what you wanted all this time, Billy?"

A summer storm's coming. The wind's back up, caressing the baby hairs on the nape of his neck; dimly he thinks of Billy's hands, pressed over his own. Golden, warm.

In a way, summer storms are worse than winter ones: hot and hellish and filled with dusty rage. Steve can feel it in his bones, the silent, panther-like tread of lightning. The taste of ash and ozone swirling, thick as a cloud of bees on his tongue.

"Answer me," he says, but if only it was that easy.

He never found out what Billy wanted—those sorts of conversations are reserved for a different kind of forever, but there's a part of Steve that always knew—a part that you never want to recognize, because it's logical, it's hurtful, because it's *true*—that Billy was the opposite of that forever. Billy was just whatever was happening in the current moment.

The spoken half of 'Can't You Hear Me Knocking' has dissolved into the instrumental break, which is usually Steve's favorite part—the

part where he'd get up to dance and pull Billy—groaning and hitching up his jeans—with him.

Steve has never felt less like dancing. Steve wants to stamp his feet and cry and pull his hair and swing his bat right through Billy's goddamn window—

Wait.

Wait.

Steve could *break the window*.

Peachy.

Something's telling him no, Steven, that's actually not peachy, that's actually rather stupid (a something that sounds remarkably like Nancy and his mom combined), but it's quickly overridden by Billy's voice nipping at his heels, smoky and snarling: *bit of mindless vandalism, Steverino, nothing wrong with a bit of mindless vandalism every now and then—something to take the edge off*, capisce?

"*Capisce*," Steve's muttering to himself; he lets go of the sill and drops to the ground, thinking: yes, Billy's right, *this* is what makes sense to him. Sa-wing and *thunk*. "Real fucking *capisce*."

There are rocks scattered across Billy's lawn, remnants of an ancient, dried-up riverbed. Steve bends down and weighs one in his palm. When he looks up, two things happen simultaneously: his watch beeps, signaling that his fifteen minutes are up, and Max rounds the corner into the street, grocery bags clanking.

Shit. God fucking *damn it*.

Steve drops the rock and dives into the row of trees dividing Billy's house and the next; he can't let her see him. Not like this.

She never does. Her face is turned away from the lawn, tipped upwards at the clown handing her a balloon. When she lowers her knees to get a better grip on the grocery bags Steve takes his chance, slipping on his Ray Bans and squeezing through the crowd of babbling children.

By the time he reaches the BMW he's out of breath, as if he's been running.

He watches from the safety of the driver's seat as Max trots up the porch steps to the front door, balloon trailing from her fist. When she steps inside, the music shuts off with the speed of someone snapping their fingers.

Steve doesn't know what to think. Doesn't know what to do. Billy's necklace is burning against his chest, as if alive. Keeping him warm when nothing else does.

The loud growl of a car engine, unmistakable, causes him to sit up so fast he thumps his head into the roof of his car and knocks the Ray Bans askew. Throwing them into his lap, he winds down his window as the Camaro slows to meet him—but the man sitting behind the wheel is someone he doesn't recognize.

"Excuse me," the stranger says. "You can't park here. It's a towaway zone."

Steve takes in the thinning blonde hair, the strong Adonis jawline. *Papa*, he realizes. "Hey, are you the house across the road?" he says, pushing his head out the window. "I used to play basketball with Billy. Billy Hargrove, you know him?"

Mr. Hargrove's eyes are such a light, sterile blue they're almost white, staring out of his sockets at Steve with blank incomprehension. "I'm sorry," he says abruptly. "I live here with just my wife and daughter. No son of mine bears that name."

"But you ..." Steve wants to believe that he heard that wrong, that it's just his stupid brain getting the stupid words mixed up again, but he didn't hear Mr. Hargrove wrong, he *knows* he didn't. "But—Billy—"

"No son of mine," Mr. Hargrove repeats. An odd, sunless smile pulls at the corners of his mouth as he leans towards Steve. "You said you played basketball with him? I'm so sorry. His mother was much the same. Complete lack of respect for other people."

Steve opens his mouth, then shuts it, lost for words. He can only stare in mute apprehension as Mr. Hargrove keeps talking, can only think: *you're wrong. So fucking wrong.*

"My first wife, now she was trouble. She was also the one who named him, so I guess it makes sense. Both of them, just—*born crooked*. Like Eve. I thought I could set her straight, like any good husband would, but you can't teach an old dog new tricks, can you?"

He pauses, still smiling. "It's Harrington, isn't it?" he says suddenly.

Steve licks his lips with a tongue that feels like it's made of wet cardboard. "As rain."

"I thought so," Mr. Hargrove says. "You look just like him. Just like your daddy. It's better that sons take after their fathers, don't you think?"

"We're not—we're not that close," Steve says. "How do you know him?"

The smile's taken on a darker edge, now; it seems to be almost taunting him. "It's a small world," Mr. Hargrove muses. "I used to work as a janitor at your father's hotel chain down in San Diego. I never met him, but they say he travels far too much to bother with a lowly cleaner such as myself. Is that right?"

Steve's eyes are starting to water; it's difficult for him to not blink, to keep his gaze trained on the other man's face. "Is—uh, is what right?"

Mr. Hargrove's mouth stretches all the way back to his gums, but his eyes—his eyes don't change. "That your daddy travels," he says, "and leaves his boy home alone."

"I'm not—" Steve licks his lips again, feeling sweat gathering in his palms, clammy and panicky. "I'm not alone. He's back home for the summer, actually. We're gonna play baseball."

"That so? Well, maybe I should pay you a visit sometime. Introduce myself properly."

"I hope you do," says Steve. "I look forward to it."

There's another bass-like growl as Mr. Hargrove revs the engine of the Camaro and backs into the driveway numbered 4819, and as soon as he does, Steve releases the breath he'd been holding in. His hands skate frantically over the tops of his legs and his forearms, sweaty enough to soak through the fabric; like a man who suddenly believes tarantulas are crawling under his clothes, and he's trying to shake them out.

He knows he should book it; knows that the longer he stays, the higher the likelihood is of someone calling the cops on him—but he can't. The image of Billy's window being fucking *nailed shut* and the man behind the wheel of his Camaro, the man with the pale eyes who'd just smiled and talked about his son like Billy doesn't even *exist*—has him rooted to the expensive leather of his seat, paralyzed.

He watches as Mr. Hargrove approaches the porch, as Max, still dressed in her Little Bo Peep get-up, slides out to greet him. Mr. Hargrove presses a kiss to her cheek, one big hand coming up to touch her hair. The gesture is protective, fatherly. Happy neighborhood, happy family, Steve thinks, but he's not so sure.

Jane talks about her Papa the way very small children talk about monsters under the bed: with her eyes wide and her voice hushed, as if to speak too loudly will summon the nightmare into being. The fairytale troll under the bridge, crouching in the wet, dripping darkness, with bulging yellow eyes and claws long enough to slice you open from neck to groin.

Billy's dad doesn't look like a troll that lives under a bridge, or any other sort of monster. In fact, his face is perfectly ordinary—so ordinary you'd pass it on the street and not look twice over your shoulder.

Except for the eyes.

The nail bat is still in Steve's backseat. He reaches over and feels for the comforting weight of it, pressing the pad of his thumb over the nails; he does the same thing before he kills a Demodog, too. It's

ritualistic, fulfils some superstitious urge in him. You have to touch the nails three times, for good luck.

When he looks up, Max is gone, and Mr. Hargrove—Mr. Hargrove's standing on the porch, staring straight at him.

*Who's that trip-trapping over my bridge?* Steve thinks. His first instinct is to duck his head—then he remembers the best piece of advice Billy's ever given him.

He stares back at Mr. Hargrove, raises his other hand in a friendly wave. Shoots him the classic Steve Harrington smile: bland, a little dopey, disarmingly soft. Plant your feet, never let them know you're afraid. Steve's still smiling when he starts the car, smiling so hard his cheeks hurt: happy, happy, happy.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Notes for the Chapter:

This didn't end in a place i expected, so i'm adding another chapter.

Content warnings: sleeping pill use, homophobia that pretty much borders on a hate crime (not shown but it's discussed), explicit mention of emotional abuse, implied physical abuse, suicide ideation, just ... billy's headspace in general.

#### III

*Shana tova. Pill-pusher. Double feature. The other doll. Somethin' good.*

*Steve—SHANA TOVA!*

*Your mom called the house earlier, I told her you were asleep.*

*Your dirty clothes are in the hamper upstairs and dinner's in the fridge. We're having a Rosh Hashanah bonfire later on tonight if you're up for it.*

*CALL YOUR MOM. She misses you. Seriously.*

*—Joyce x*

"I have a hamper now?" Steve asks aloud. He leaves Joyce's note taped to the fridge and shuffles back upstairs, stifling a yawn behind his fist. When he reaches the landing, looking around for this so-called hamper he apparently never realized he had, he notices his bedroom door standing ajar.

Cautiously, as if he's approaching the den of a nesting animal, Steve reaches out and closes his hand around the knob. A breeze stirs on the other side, tickling his eyelashes, and his caution turns to unease.

Steve swallows, then pushes the door open all the way. “Oh, no,” he murmurs. “No, no, no. You *didn’t*, Joyce.”

She did. Steve stares at his spotless carpet with rising horror, at his empty wastepaper basket, his bed standing neatly made, like the bed of a stranger. Worse, far worse, is the window that’s hanging wide open, the draught that’s filling the room, fresh and bright as morning sunshine.

“Fuck,” he whispers. “*Fuck.*”

Steve darts to his closet, pulling out hanger after hanger onto the floor in a blind panic, yanking at the drawers of his desk and violently emptying the contents atop jackets and shirts, shoes and the suit his mom likes having him wear at formal gatherings. Eventually, he finds Billy’s jacket tucked away inside his gym bag, and his relief is a breathless, shaking thing, thundering through his chest as he pulls it out and sits up, pressing his face to the sleeve, ruddy with dried blood. He’s not sure how long he sits there, curled on his floor amidst strewn piles of clothing—it could’ve been ten minutes, it could’ve been an hour. Maybe he would’ve sat there even longer, if the phone hadn’t rung.

(And Steve knows he’s not going to hear the voice he wants to hear on the other end of the line, but there’s still a part of him that thinks it’s gonna come when he picks up, the pause and then the low, amused sneer of *pretty boy*, Billy’s voice so deep the connection crackles with it—) “Harrington residence.”

“*Shana tova*, my darling one,” his mom says.

“*Shana tova*, mom. How’s Budapest?”

His mom sniffs. “Oh, it’s fine, I suppose. Twice as many beggars this year than there were last year. They clog the city streets like fleas on a dog’s back. I don’t know why the government lets them get away with it, it’s bad for tourism. We won’t be coming back, will we, John?”

Steve hears his father’s affirmative grunt in the background.

“Maybe you’ll be in Hawkins for Rosh Hashanah next year,” he offers, but he’s only half-serious; he can’t remember the last time he celebrated Jewish New Year with his parents.

“Maybe,” his mom says. Steve knows by the tone of her voice that she’s already checked out of the conversation; he suspects she wasn’t really here to begin with. Restless, he maneuvers his body across his bed, so that he’s lying on the side that’s closest to the light switch; the other side, the one that faces the window, is Billy’s side. “Well, I’ll let you go—your father wants to talk to you.”

“Okay.” Steve hesitates—then, thinking of Joyce and her note, he says, “I love you, mom.”

She only sighs. “Me too, darling one. Bye-bye for now.”

It’s always so perfunctory, the way his parents do things. Even their marriage feels stilted, like a handshake performed at the beginning of a business meeting. Steve hadn’t really put two and two together until Billy had pointed it out for him—until Billy had asked him, *that’s normal for you?* and Steve had only been able to reply, *Sure. Why?* because the question was so fucking left-field. Why *shouldn’t* it be normal for him? His mom’s people are scattered across Europe like thrown dice; his dad’s relatives are all-American, turtleneck-wearing Ivy League graduates with more money than they know what to do with—but no children. Never any other children aside from Steve.

Maybe there’d been a cousin or two back in Hungary—boys Steve’s age, who’d climbed trees with him and shown him how to crack open the shells of pomegranates to get at the ruby-red clusters of seeds inside. Maybe. He can’t be sure.

There’s a certain waxy quality to childhood memories, how they become malleable as you get older, like clay softened by the heat of your palms. Steve’s pretty sure he’s embellished his, glossed them over with a shiny veneer that makes them seem nicer than they are. Playing baseball with his dad. Bug bites adding to the constellation of moles on his shoulders. Lips and chin sticky, pink with pomegranate juice.

“Steve-o,” his dad says in his ear, and almost immediately, Steve feels the muscles in his back tense. He sits upright on the bed—knowing his father can’t see him, but the behavior’s automatic, borne from a thousand and one lectures about Good Business Etiquette and *strong body language, champ, gotta let ‘em know you’re in charge*. “How are the college applications going?”

There it is, Steve thinks grimly. “I’m looking at them right now.”

His dad makes a dismissive noise. “I don’t have to remind you, Steve-o, what we talked about? I really don’t think college is the environment for you, the curriculum—”

“I remember.” God, Steve fucking hates this—he slept through the whole day but now he feels bone-weary, like all he’d been doing was sleeping with his eyes open. He has to remind himself that this is what his dad wants: to wear him out so that he doesn’t even have the strength to defend himself. His father is efficient like that—a salesman through and through. Nobody ever called him a name like *mush mouth* when he was the star batter of the Hawkins High ’54 Baseball League. No sir.

“Legacy is important for our family,” Dad says. “The name Harrington still bears a lot of weight in this county. You understand that, don’t you?”

Usually Steve would listen to these lectures with a *yes, Dad, I understand, Dad*, but he’s staring at Billy’s side of the bed, his fingers digging into the fresh, clean sheets Joyce has lain down for him. She meant well. He knows she did, and he’s grateful, only—only he’s thinking about how the sheets used to smell like Billy. How they used to have the slopes and valleys of Billy’s body carved in them, like monoliths drawn from a cliff-face by the wind and the sand—and he wants to believe his dad means well, knows his dad wants him to believe it, too. Therein lies the catch.

“I—I’ve already applied for a college,” he says. Digging his fingers in and clenching his jaw so the words come out staggering, garbled: “In Chicago. I forgot to tell you.”

The *snick* of his father’s tongue, rolling against his smoke-stained

teeth, echoes down the line for what feels like a millennium.

“Champ,” he says finally, “haven’t you been listening to a word I said?”

“Guess not. Are you gonna come visit me while I’m there, Dad?”

The last thing Steve hears before his father hangs up on him is his mom, crying in the background.

\*

*Abnormal Psychiatrist*, Steve thinks the sign on Dr. Barlow’s door is meant to say. Only the first two letters have flaked away, so it just reads *normal Psychiatrist* instead. What Steve would give to have a camera on him so he can take a photo of it; *normal Psychiatrist*, that’s the sort of thing Billy would call a good giggle. Like a dog walking on its hind legs.

“And what can I do for you, Steven?” Dr. Barlow says.

Steve crosses his ankles to stop them from jiggling. “Uh. I’d like a referral, please. For another specialist.”

Dr. Barlow raps his pen thoughtfully against the edge of his vast oaken writing desk. “I see. And how is your prescription going?”

“Terrible. The Temazepam—”

“Is it helping you sleep?”

“Sort of, but—”

“But what?” Dr. Barlow says sharply, pen still rapping. “If the pills are working, then why would you need a referral?”

Steve allows his eyes to drift from his crossed ankles to the objects crowding Dr. Barlow’s desk, recognizing the same toy drinking bird his dad has at home. Next to that is a framed kid’s drawing of Eeyore from *Winnie the Pooh*, with a speech bubble blowing from his mouth that says: *Don’t Worry. Be Happy!*

“My grandson drew that,” Dr. Barlow says, following Steve’s gaze. “Words to live by, no?”

“They’re words,” Steve says. He uncrosses his ankles, then crosses them back over. “I don’t feel good when I’m on Temazepam. I can sleep, but I don’t feel *well-rested* the morning after.”

“And how do they make you feel, if not well-rested?”

“Like—like I wanna die.”

*Stupid*, Steve scolds himself. *So fucking stupid.* He hates himself for needing to say it, hates himself for even feeling this way. The sleeping pills are meant to help him, just like they help other people—but they don’t, and that’s stupid as hell. For Steve, a drugged sleep is like sinking into a coffin of quicksand and then trying to claw his way back out once the sun starts to shine through the window. It leaves him feeling even groggier than talking to his dad, and that’s fucking saying something.

“Well, that’s no good, we can’t have that,” says Dr. Barlow mildly. “Perhaps we should try something a little bit stronger. Have you heard the name ‘Valium’ before?”

“With all due respect,” Steve says quickly, trying and failing to keep the strain out of his voice, “I don’t want any more prescriptions. I want a referral for a sleep clinic. There’s one in Indianapolis that—”

“I don’t provide referrals for meditative treatments. The current body of research into hypnosis leaves much to be desired.” Dr. Barlow throws his pen down and leans forward, steepling his long fingers under his chin. Steve catches a glimpse of two gold-capped teeth when he smiles, winking above his lower lip. “I’m just a pill-pusher, Steven. If you want to see a psychologist, you’ll have to go back to your doctor for the referral. Or—”

“Or?” he repeats, dreading the answer.

“Allow me to introduce you to some new friends,” Dr. Barlow says. He unclasps his fingers and pulls open a drawer in his desk. There’s the tell-tale clatter of pill bottles; Barlow lines them all up in a neat

row in front of Steve, turning the labels outward so he can read them. “Valium and Rohypnol. Your long-acting benzodiazepines. Failing that, you can try Methaqualone.”

Steve takes the last bottle from him, mouthing the word *Methaqualone* silently to himself. He knows that word, surprisingly; he’s heard it from Jonathan. Tommy, too. “You’re giving me quaaludes?”

Dr. Barlow coughs. “Well, I won’t deny that that is the, uh, *street name* for them. They’re barbitals, and you should only use them as a last resort.”

Jonathan’s told Steve about quaaludes—about how the former frontman of Pink Floyd, Syd Barrett, once crushed up a whole bottle of them into his hair while in the throes of a psychotic breakdown. The ‘ludes had melted under the heat of the stage lights, until the skin of Syd’s cheeks and temples looked like it was falling right off his skull. Scary stuff, they’d both agreed soberly, with all the certainty of the young.

“I don’t know,” he says uneasily. “This seems a bit extreme—”

“Or you can just go back to your doctor, and have your trip to Augusta be for nothing. Take your pick,” says Dr. Barlow, with a shrug. “Sometimes extreme is a necessary measure to take, Steven. Don’t be afraid of the pills. The pills are your friends. *I’m* your friend. Remember—”

He rotates the drawing of Eeyore for emphasis and Steve finishes his sentence for him: “Don’t worry. Just be happy.”

Another predatory wink of gold teeth. “There’s a good boy.”

\*

“You heard the man,” Steve tells his reflection. “Just don’t.”

His jacket pockets rattle in agreement, the sound like a weight around his ankles, holding him down.

Once he makes the hour-long drive back to Hawkins, he’ll stand in

his own bathroom, which is very much like this one except there are no bars on the windows and no fluorescent purple lights in the cubicles to stop people from shooting up in them. His bathroom at home will have an empty medicine cabinet above the sink, and Steve will fill its shelves with the bottles Dr. Barlow had pressed in his hands like a pill-pushing Santa Claus: Temazepam, Rohypnol, Valium, Methaqualone. He'll arrange them like they're bottles of candy, the kind that you suck on until your tongue turns a different color, depending on what flavor you choose. Don't worry. Just close your eyes and take the damn meds, and everything will be A-OK.

Steve sighs to himself, long and low.

"*Don't*," he says to his reflection again, but his hands won't move. They're still clutching at the sides of the basin, knuckles bulging like colorless grapes under the dank bathroom lighting.

He can't stop thinking about Syd Barrett, standing catatonic on stage. *Heard it looked like his face was comin' off*, Jonathan had said. *Can you imagine? How far does a guy have to burrow inside his own mind to even get to that point?*

Not far, thinks Steve. Not far at all.

Maybe the 'ludes had made Syd's face look like it was comin' off; maybe he thought they'd give him a new face. A new body and brain and soul altogether, one that didn't turn on him every minute of the day. Dr. Barlow has a pill for everything stowed away in the seemingly bottomless drawers of his desk; Steve's seen them. Steve knows he's lucky, a casual addiction to quaaludes being the worst he has to worry about. *Poor Syd*.

It comes like a punch in the dark, what happens next. Steve's so deep into his thoughts about Syd Barrett and popping benzos like they're Skittles that he doesn't expect it, doesn't even see it coming.

The door to the bathroom opens and there comes the faint sound of whistling—the opening power chords of Black Sabbath's 'Paranoid'. Fuckin' A, Steve thinks distantly. Billy had a Black Sabbath tape in his car, and he gave a copy for Steve to keep in his BMW, too—because while Billy understood that he had to listen to the Stones

every once in a while to get his dick wet, Black Sabbath was non-negotiable.

He casts a cursory glance out of the corner of his eye, about to tip the other guy the awkward nod that's a pre-requisite for unintended interactions at the men's urinal—when he sees who that faintly melodious whistle belongs to, and his jaw drops.

Billy.

Billy Hargrove gapes at him, eyes almost bugging out of their sockets in a look of pure, unbridled panic.

In any other circumstance, that look would be comical, maybe even worth a good giggle—like Steve's pulled the carpet out from underneath Billy's feet in every sense of the phrase. Steve doesn't laugh, though. His limbs have locked up, snap-frozen like the surface of a lake in winter, and his voice is floating somewhere on the bottom, submerged under the layer of ice. He stares back at Billy

*(months it's been months and he never called)*

the way a man dying of thirst might stare at a mirage in the desert, convinced it's going to disappear the second he crawls closer and plunges his head into its crystal waters—

The door swings shut with a loud bang, but Steve barely registers the sound. He's watching Billy's eyes grow wide, wider than he's ever seen them—so wide the blue of his irises shrinks to pinpricks and Steve thinks with black, terrifying certainty: *he's gonna run. He's gonna turn tail and run. All this time, and he never*—

The words come then, regurgitated from some unheard-of part of him that he wasn't even aware existed: voice cool, calm, and collected when he says, “This is the loony bin, Hargrove.”

Instinctively Steve straightens his shoulders, drawing himself up to his full height. Maybe he's more like his dad than he thought. Cool, cool as a cucumber.

(But it's hard to be cool when you're thinking of the time your boyfriend (ex-boyfriend? Boyfriend back from the dead? Fuck,

is *boyfriend* even the right word to describe Billy, does it even encapsulate what he was to Steve?) once fucked you senseless in a bathroom very much like this one. Once pushed you up against the wall, the cold hardness of the tile diluted by the scalding heat of his hand on your back, pushing you to breaking point—)

“That’s why I’m here,” Billy says. Smoothly, like a well-oiled machine. Smile so sweet it may as well be spun from sugar. “I’m fucking crazy, Harrington. Crazier than a sack of weasels, as my dearest, darling *sister* says.”

He takes a step forwards, but to Steve it looks more like he’s gliding, moving in slow motion. Still smiling, Billy walks to the other end of the urinal and unzips his fly. He doesn’t smack Steve’s ass as he passes—he doesn’t even check him with his shoulder.

Steve wants to laugh. He wants to cry, too. He can’t decide which.

“I’ll meet you outside,” is what he says instead.

Billy doesn’t reply. Off, off, off.

Steve feels the ice in his chest cracking, splitting apart. The grinding, screaming crash as it falls, crumbling into the hungry torrent below.

Wordlessly, he turns on his heel and makes a beeline for the door. Once outside he curls inwards on himself, hands reaching for his knees, reaching for anything to hold onto, anything to stop him from falling into the water, because he hates the water. The water that’s rising, rising out of the pit in his stomach, eclipsing his vision with thousands of tiny black dancing dots, running over his eyes and cheeks like

(*quaaludes*)

the inky lines of smudged words, the writing on the wall: *he doesn’t want to see me*. Steve knows this, because he’s seen that look on Billy’s face before. The panic, the guilt, the reluctance—he’s seen all of that before, on Nancy’s face. When Nancy had stepped out of Jonathan’s car after days of radio silence and didn’t say anything, didn’t even look at him, had just left him to figure it out for himself.

And now Steve understands how stupid he truly is, that he thought—no, he *assumed*, because that's what he always does, assumes these things of people without reason—he thought Billy was different. The punch of realization that comes in the dark, leaving him winded, choking on his own spit and blood, twisting, cutting deep.

What's that saying of his dad's? *You can't ever assume things, Steve-o, because it makes an ass out of 'u' and 'me'*.

There's a hand on Steve's waist, the hand of an older lady who looks like she might be Dr. Barlow's receptionist but he can't read her name tag; the black dots, the words are still dripping over his vision like condensation gathered on the windshield of his car and there's a phone ringing but no one's picking up, why isn't anyone picking up? The receptionist's lipsticked mouth moves up and down in Steve's face, asking him if he's okay, does he need a glass of water, he looks a little faint, maybe he should sit down, and Steve doesn't know how to make her understand, doesn't know how to tell her, *he never wanted to see me, never* and the phone keeps ringing, ringing.

\*

Billy's lost weight.

Steve's brain—or, rather, the obsessive, querulous organism his brain has become in the passage of time following Barb's death—tallies the differences and similarities between the Billy now and the Billy before, Post versus Pre. The Billy now has lost weight. The Billy before had biceps almost as big as Jane's head; the Billy now looks small and shrunken, as if someone's scooped out the other half of him with a sharpened spoon. The Billy before was tanned to the point of brown; the Billy now has pale spiders for hands, creeping from the long sleeves of his Alice Cooper shirt—Alice Cooper grinning balefully up at Steve from where he's bursting out of a hole in the ground, hand contorted into a beastly claw. *No More Mr. Nice Guy!* the caption says, in ghoulish horror-movie letters.

The Billy now isn't looking at Steve; his eyes are set, unblinking, on the window next to their table, chasing the movement of the cars that occasionally drift past on the street outside.

The Billy before would look at him—the Billy before couldn't seem to take his eyes off Steve, smirking and flicking his tongue, and Steve was the one who flatly refused to look, because he knew that as soon as he did, the darkness of Billy's eyelashes, and the way they made his eyes look even more blue, would latch onto him and then he'd be spiraling, lost.

Even before all that, Billy was all over him. He shuttled around in Steve's atmosphere as relentlessly as he did everything else, like he wanted to make sure Steve would feel him when he was gone—and Steve did. The ache of his shoulder from where Billy checked him on the court, so hard he'd fallen over. The ache for more, more, *more*—running around and around in the backdrop of their lives like a broken record, an itch you can't quite scratch.

Ernest Becker talked about immortality projects, about our need to leave time-stamps of our existence. Pre-Billy was like that; he left a mess wherever he went. Bruises on Steve's skin in the shape of handprints, bruises that Steve secretly hated to see fade. The white fog of his breath on Steve's car windows, so thick Steve could engrave his name in it, as if they were lovestruck middle schoolers: *S.H + B.H.*

His brain tallies all of this—the handprints, the bruises, the ache, blue—against the Post-Billy, drawing a line through it like the crosses Steve's teachers used to scrawl all over his English homework. Zero. Nada. *Bye-bye*, as his mom would say.

“How’s Max?”

Billy’s gaze flickers, but only a little. If Steve hadn’t been looking for it, he wouldn’t have known it was there.

“Fine, I guess.” His voice is low and dry, like the rasp of dead leaves.  
“We don’t talk.”

“I saw her,” Steve persists. “A couple of weeks ago. She looked ... scared out of her mind.” He pauses, watching the fingers of Billy’s right hand draw slow circles on the tabletop. “C’mon. You never talked to her this whole time?”

The fingers clench in the shadow of a fist, then slacken. Billy's nails—grimy, bitten down to the quick—start tapping at the edge of the table. “No,” he says. “It’s none of her business. The brat’s far too nosy by half.”

Tap-tap-tap, go Billy’s fingers on the table. Tap-tap-tap, like lines of Morse code. That’s a word Steve learned from the kids; five letters, well within the realm of a green word, but it isn’t. Steve never understood how they did it, how Hopper was able to help save Will just by writing down a couple of dots and dashes.

Sometimes, he had as much trouble with Billy’s language; Billy would say one thing and Steve would hear something else entirely. Or—and this happened more times than he’d rather admit—he wasn’t even listening, didn’t even *think* that all Billy wanted was for someone, *anyone* to just let him talk.

“Can I get you boys a refill?” asks the waitress.

Billy nods tersely and Steve, craving a hit of sugar, decides to ask for a jelly doughnut to go with his coffee. The waitress smiles and tells him that Augusta is known for its jelly doughnuts, why, they’re a local specialty! When she walks off, her hips swaying cheerfully under her uniform, Steve sees that Billy’s leering, derisive, as if this display of country-town hospitality is beneath him.

At least that hasn’t changed, he thinks. “C’mom,” he tries again. “Max buys your cigarettes … your beer …”

“Steve.” Billy’s tone is brusque, wound tight. “Just drop it, okay? I don’t wanna talk about Max.”

*But I do, Steve thinks desperately. I want to talk about everything. Where you’ve been, what you’ve been doing, why didn’t you call. I’m listening now, Billy, even though I wasn’t before. Why isn’t that enough for you?*

It’s unnatural, the silence that’s jammed itself between them; it cloaks Billy like a thick, impenetrable membrane, one that Steve’s almost afraid to stick his finger in. Sometimes, even if he lets you get close, Billy will still bite back. Hard.

“She’s angry,” Billy says at last. “Angrier than I am, these days. I don’t know how to make it stop. Never did.”

His necklace lies stretched out in the middle of the table, charm facing upwards. Steve watches as the white shapes of Billy’s hands inch forwards, pulling it up to the light. Billy frowns down at this fragment of his past self, like it’s something he knows but the exact details are escaping him.

“Why is she angry?”

Billy’s upper lip curls back from his teeth, and instead of looping the necklace around his neck—where it should be—he rests it back on the tabletop. “Now, now, sweetheart. I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

“I’m not following you.”

“The *pills*, Harrington.” Billy gives an impatient jerk of his head, gesturing to Steve’s jacket pockets. “You got a diagnosis?”

“Uh, no.”

“You don’t sleep.” Billy doesn’t phrase it like a question, and yet Steve could’ve sworn he heard it there—a spike of concern. He doesn’t know whether it’s his brain seeing things; wishful thinking, maybe.

“You know I don’t,” he mutters.

The waitress sails past to place Steve’s jelly doughnut in front of him, steaming hot and drenched in icing sugar, but the craving’s left him quick as it came. Instead his stomach is bubbling like a kettle at the boil, sending fingers of sickness trailing up his throat. *What did you expect? For him to be happy to see you?* he asks himself. *Did you really think it was going to be that simple?*

“So,” Billy wheedles, lip still curled. “What’s your poison?”

“Valium. ‘ludes.” Steve shrugs casually, like the thought of benzos and tranquilizers coursing through his bloodstream doesn’t scare the bejesus out of him. Sleeping pills, the bane of every neglected

housewife in America—and he's seen Karen Wheeler crowding the doors of the local pharmacy first thing on a Sunday morning, even if Karen, so focused on haggling with Mr. Nelson about her prescription, doesn't.

Billy's not looking at him, but his eyes—still so perceptive, so blue—miss nothing. "Shit's addictive, amigo."

"What about you, *amigo*?" Steve retorts, defensive. "What've they got you saddled with?"

Billy brings his other hand out from underneath the table and opens it, dropping a single pill packet down into the no-man's land between himself and the necklace. Steve has to stretch his arm almost fully outwards to pick it up; he turns the packet over in his fingers, brain flipping the words on their heads and then back upright: RITALIN is one. DEFICIT is another.

**DEFICIT.** The word seems to crouch, black and spiny, like a coil of barbed wire; it makes him think of Mr. Aird, looming in front of his desk, impossibly tall—and of his father, telling Steve he's IMPAIRED and this is why you can't go to college, why you need to join the family business instead, CHAMP.

"Your cop friend cut me a deal," says Billy, still in that dry, hollow voice. "I stay out of juvie, but only if I agree to see a shrink. We're down to two visits a month now. Before it was like ... the shrink would drive to the house and deliver the pills."

**DEFICIT.** It's an ugly-looking word, the letters uneven around the outsides, a crown of thorns. Steve's stomach roils, and he pushes the pill packet back in Billy's direction without comment.

"Those fucks down at the courthouse," Billy continues; Steve looks up, surprised, but he doesn't dare interrupt, "Whitechurch and his lawyers, they all wanted to throw away the damn key, like I was worth nothin'. In a way, they still got what they wanted. You spend three months under house arrest, it starts to feel like a death sentence."

Steve chews at his lip, trying not to show any overt reaction at this

information. “You were under house arrest?”

“Yeah, that’s what I just *said*, pretty boy,” Billy barks suddenly, waspish. His hand twitches, like it wants to hit something, hit it hard enough to break. “Christ, I can’t do this sober.”

He pulls a flask out of his pocket, unscrewing the cap and pouring the contents straight into his coffee cup. Billy stirs the liquid through with a teaspoon like it’s a cube of sugar, and when he brings it up to his mouth to lick it clean Steve sees that his earring’s gone—the hole’s been sealed over with tape.

“Shit, man,” he says. “Are you gonna be okay to drive home?”

“You ever stop worrying, *mom*?” Billy raises his cup to his lips, pinkie finger sticking out with a daintiness that strikes Steve as absurd for a guy who just poured straight-up lighter fluid into his coffee. “ ‘Course I’m gonna fucking be okay. I can stop anytime.”

*Control freak*, Steve thinks.

He needs to do something. He needs to tell Billy that look, it is going to be okay, because he’s here now, or maybe close his own hand over Billy’s and hold it until it unclenches—but he’s not even sure if any of that has power here, in this itchy, membranous space of silence and prickly tension, where Billy’s lost weight and his hair—his hair’s darkened to the color of congealed honey. It’s a Billy he doesn’t even recognize. An imposter.

“You were never going to call me, were you?” he says.

“What, like I *owe* you a phone call? Just what the fuck do you think you are to me, Harrington?”

“Your *boyfriend*, dickhead.” Steve’s voice carries across the diner, which would usually be a cause for concern, but for once, he could care less that people might hear them. That Billy would even have the *gall* to throw it back in his face as part of some bizarre power-play, after everything they’ve been through, has him speechless, gutted. “That’s just what you *do*—”

Billy swallows, wipes his mouth on his sleeve, and spits, “You and

your fucking rules—”

“I’m sorry, did I ever force you? Did I ever *not* give you a choice?” Steve leans forward, not missing the way Billy seems to shrink from him. “I suppose you’re gonna tell me that you’re not gay, either,” he adds, in a lower voice. “That it never meant anything. You really wanna play that game with me, Hargrove?”

That’s all Billy ever is, ever was: afraid. It’s why he picks at people like they’re scabs, clawing at their insecurities until they start to bleed—so he can say to them: *there, now you’re just as ugly as I am. How does that make you feel?*

“You can’t rewrite history,” Steve says. “I know you want to, but you can’t. I was there.”

Billy’s lip curls back, all the way to the edge of his face; he’s gripping his coffee cup with both hands now, holding it like he wants nothing more than to hurl it in Steve’s direction. Maybe that’s the solution, thinks Steve. Just skip the mind games and get right into the nitty gritty of each other, like other men do when they’ve got a bone to pick.

Fighting Billy is a lot simpler than fucking him; there’s no risk of catching feelings, after. Only the risk of getting your ass handed to you on a silver platter, but that’s okay. Steve would rather deal with the ache of a broken bone than the ache of Billy.

“You weren’t there.” Billy’s back to playing with the necklace again, tipping the chain so that the charm drops into his palm. “You didn’t see what happened. You don’t know the whole story.”

“Then fucking *talk* to me.” *Don’t do this shit*, Steve wants to scream at him. *Don’t push me away*.

Even sitting down, Billy seems trapped in a state of continuous motion. He rolls the charm over his knuckles, the movement of his fingers fluid, graceful. The *fwip* of his lighter as he touches it to the tip of a cigarette, smoke billowing across his sneer in a gray shroud. “Once upon time, there was this kid.” The cigarette bobs between his lips as he talks. “His name was Buster, and he was fucked in the

head. But it wasn't his fault. It ran in the family, y'see. His mama left 'cause she was fucked in the head, and his daddy was already fucked in the head from the war. So. One big happy family, you could say it was. Or that's what Buster's daddy wanted people to think."

He laughs then, a dark, almost hysterical sound, utterly without humor.

"Buster's mama ran away and broke her man's heart; broke it right in two. Now, every year on her birthday, Buster's daddy makes him go out and buy a cake. It has to be an orange cake; Buster's mama never wanted anythin' else for her birthday dinner aside from orange cake. Only this year, Buster was trapped in a small town, and when he went to the Big Buy he was told no orange cake, only chocolate. Whatever, shouldn't fucking matter, right? he thought. But he was wrong. Buster's daddy, he didn't like that. Buster's daddy, when he saw what Buster had brought home instead of orange cake, he—"

Smoke bleeds from Billy's nostrils before it's sucked straight into the black pit of his mouth; he opens wide, showing Steve all his teeth. It's not a smile, not even close to it—it's not the smile Steve knows and loves, but more like a reflexive spasm of mouth muscles, twitchy, cadaverous.

"I'll spare you the gory details, baby," whispers Billy. "All you need to know is that Buster was in trouble that day, and he couldn't call nobody, no matter how much he wanted to. Sometimes it's like that, he doesn't know what mood his daddy's gonna be in, if he's gonna be nice or if he's not. Anyway. Buster still had to go to school. And he did. And then it went to shit.

"Sometimes Buster didn't like older men, 'cause they reminded him too much of his war daddy. Principal Whitechurch was one of those men. Principal Whitechurch didn't like Buster because he decided one day that was how it was gonna be. So, Whitechurch was already waitin' for Buster when he pulled up to school after Buster got himself a thrashing from his daddy, and as soon as Buster stepped out of his car Whitechurch fucking *laid* into him, like—"

His voice rises an octave, returning back that hysterical, jeering note.

*“What’s with the earring? What’s with the tight jeans, huh, Hargrove? You look like a goddamn faggot in those jeans—don’t give me that cheek, I’ve seen you around with Harrington. Your old man know that that’s what you are? A faggot?”*

“He didn’t,” Steve exhales. “Oh, Billy—”

Billy presses his palm to his temples, pressing so hard Steve wonders if he means to cave the front wall of his cranium in. *Sa-wing*, batter.

(Three months house arrest, he thinks. A prisoner in your own home. A prisoner in your own head.)

“I *tried*,” Billy says, voice back to normal. “I swear on my mother’s name, I tried so fucking hard not to snap. I was on straight As, you know? But these—these *people*, they take one look at me and ...” He lowers his fist and he finally looks at Steve, looks at him like a drowning man, like Steve’s the shoreline on the horizon, drifting further and further out of his reach. “I tried to *walk away*. You know me. I *never walk away*.”

“Never,” Steve says, a little deliriously; he wants to smile, but his face feels numb, tingly.

“Whitechurch grabbed my hands,” Billy says, and Steve jumps as his hands lash out, wrapping around his wrists in a hard, painful vice and yanking him forwards so that his teeth click together and he’s staring into the haunted shutters of Billy’s eyes. “And then he *pulls* me, like he’s gonna hold me down and—and—”

Steve breathes out, “Billy. You’re hurting me,” and Billy’s eyelashes dance against his cheek as he swallows tremulously, then swallows again. He releases Steve back into his side of the booth, Steve rubbing at the sore skin of his wrists, trembling, dazed. Billy may have lost weight, but his hands haven’t lost that incredible strength. A strength that’s almost spelled the deaths of two people, he can’t ever forget.

“No one,” Billy says hoarsely, taking another long, brooding drag, “and I mean *no one*, gets to touch me like that—”

Steve looks up. “No one except your dad, right?”

This time, Billy visibly recoils—like Steve’s pressed a rubber band to his skin and flicked him with it. He lifts his hand to brush at the taped-over hole in his ear; Steve doesn’t think he’s even aware he’s doing it.

“Yeah,” Billy says. Mouth twitching, eyes glassy, finger still playing with his ear. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Sweet Jesus.” Steve shoves a shaky hand through his hair. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

There’s a darting sort of desperation in the way Billy reaches for his second cigarette; he looks like he’s scrabbling for purchase. “What?”

“Whitechurch can’t be manhandling kids like that,” Steve says. “Jesus, Billy—even what he *said* to you, that’s gotta be illegal—”

“And who would believe me? Huh?” demands Billy viciously. “It was my word against his—*my* word, Harrington. And who am I? I’m that fucking metalhead from California who beat *King Steve*’s face in and threatened Sinclair, a fucking *child*. I’m good-for-nothing, a menace. I could say anything, but they don’t care. Straight As don’t mean *shit* when people have already made up their minds.”

Steve wants to tell him that he’s wrong. He wants to tell Billy that there are good people in Hawkins—people like Joyce Byers, like Jane Hopper, who wouldn’t walk past someone lying in the gutter without stopping and checking for a pulse—but then again, he doesn’t know what it’s like for Billy, does he? Billy, who’s been in the gutter his whole life, begging for scraps, invisible. Steve can’t even *imagine* how he would feel, if that was him.

Billy’s voice swiftly jolts him out of his reverie. “Could say anything to you,” he says, coyly. Eyes glowing, as if lit from behind. “You’d believe me, wouldn’t you?”

Steve’s mouth goes dry. The skin atop his hands is pins and needles, breaking out in waves of gooseflesh and he has the urge to pull them into his lap, before Billy can swoop back down and get a hold. “Were

you—were you lying?”

Billy grins at him like a baby wolf, the blue in his eyes sparkling and dancing with cold, distant fire. Steve waits for them to start melting down his face, for his skin to blister and peel off his skull like the petals of a flower, revealing four sets of gnashing teeth.

“What if,” Billy purrs, “what if Whitechurch never said anything, never did anything? What if I just like to *hurt*? ”

“Stop,” Steve says. “Billy—”

*Red, he thinks. Red for stop, for danger.* Billy had seen red that day in the parking lot; he saw red a lot, but he was good for Steve. He kept a lid on the red for as long as he could, even as it licked at his insides and crowded his pores in a beguiling crimson mist, obscuring all rational thought; Whitechurch would’ve been the final straw, the word *faggot* worming its way under the crevices of Billy’s smile and breaking it wide open, letting that red mist stream out into the world in destructive, sulphuric tendrils. Maybe that’s when Billy found his peace—in finally letting himself go. In watching all that hateful red fly back in the faces of those who’d boxed him in his whole life. Free at last.

“My dad likes to hurt,” says Billy. “He won’t admit it, but I know he does. He did it with *impunity*.” He pauses, as if savoring the words. “Didn’t I say it runs in the family?”

“Bullshit,” says Steve. “You’re fucking bullshitting me.”

“Am I? You wanna bet on it?”

“Billy, for the last time, stop it. This isn’t what we—”

“*Stop it,*” Billy mimics, tittering; the sound’s slithery, grotesque. “Yeah, that’s what Whitechurch said, too. He begged me to stop. Begged, like the fucking *dog* he is.”

Steve chews his lip, counting to three before speaking again. “You’re just trying to push me away,” he says. “You’re *scared* of me, Hargrove. You’re scared that I—”

“Scared, Harrington? Of you?” Billy throws back his head, but he doesn’t laugh; his tongue lolls from his mouth, crawling across his lower lip like a fat pink worm. In the blink of an eye, the Billy Steve knows and loves is gone; the thing that almost killed him in Joyce Byers’ kitchen is sitting in his place now, its face a grinning, demonic mask, distorted beyond comprehension. “Where the flying fuck did you get that from?”

Steve raises his jelly doughnut to his lips. *Call his bluff*, he reminds himself. *He can’t run rings around you if you don’t play.* “I know you,” he says. “And you swore on your mother’s name.”

There’s several beats of silence, then several more; it’s a silence that grows and grows and grows, threatening to engulf them—

“God,” the Billy-thing snarls. “God, you’re so—”

*Magic word, Billy*, Steve thinks. *C’mom, I wanna hear you say it.*

“—fucking stupid, Harrington.”

Steve stands up.

The wad of dollar bills sticks to his palm as he pulls them out of his wallet, swiping them across the table. Next to Billy’s necklace, which he kept safe for almost half a year. An awful, heavy calm befalls him as he slips out of the booth, strides past all the other booths, and exits the diner. The tinkle of the bell over the doorway, like a period at the end of a sentence. *Bye-bye.*

The sunlight beats down on Steve’s neck as he walks across the street, wiping the last of the icing sugar on his jeans.

Billy doesn’t mean it.

Billy’s hurting. Billy’s hurting so much it’s killing him—killing everything he touches.

He doesn’t mean it. The way he’d pressed the heel of his palm to his head, pressing so deeply it left an impression of his fist over his eye socket—pressing like he’d been trying to lance a boil.

Billy's a good actor, but he's not that good.

Steve tries to focus on the movement of his feet below him. Right foot, left foot.

Billy really didn't mean to call him stupid. Steve's not stupid.

The lies we tell ourselves.

Right, left, right, left. Keep walking. Don't turn back. No, don't you turn back. Fucking commit, dammit.

Once he reaches fifty steps, he looks back at the diner.

He can see their table through the window Billy had been looking out of when he told Steve the story about Buster and the birthday cake. It's empty. The same waitress is spraying down the chairs, rearranging the jars of cutlery, replacing the napkins with fresh ones. He wonders how long it'll take for another couple to slide into that same spot. He wonders how many have already sat there, and how many more will. Life goes on. Steve has to go on.

His car's still parked behind Dr. Barlow's office, but he doesn't walk that way. Instead, Steve walks the other way, towards what once would've been Augusta's main arterial street. Now, it looks like something out of a museum.

Shards of glass crunch under his high-tops as he passes shop windows, some empty, others well on their way. A pair of naked mannequins, faces blank and featureless, lie positioned on the curb, blunt groins scissored together in an unsettling imitation of fucking. Steve's neck itches; he steals another peek over his shoulder.

The street stretches out behind him like a distorted reflection in a funhouse mirror, the tops of buildings leaning over the road on crumbling foundations, their faces

*(just born crooked like Eve)*

crooked and drunken, like the kind of drunk Billy was sometimes, which was light and airy and happy instead of sullen and quick to anger; they'd sit on the hood of his Camaro and get so drunk it was

like you could actually see the world whirring on its axis and every splash of starlight was its own distinct possibility.

Steve keeps walking.

Further up the street, a gaggle of children sit in the back of a pick-up truck, blowing smoke rings up at the dispirited sky. Dirty faces, dirty hair. The oldest looks to be about Jane's age; the youngest, around five or six. Refugees of a tumbleweed town.

The itch has spread down his neck to his armpits; his hands are shaking like an old man's. He crosses them forcefully over his chest and walks a little faster. Right then left.

A ramshackle movie theater stands over the intersection, crowned in a moving conga-line of flashing lights, gaudy, inviting. Crammed inside the concessions stand is a pimply-faced youth, fanning listlessly through the pages of that month's *Playboy*.

"Howdy," Steve says. "You show movies here?"

The youth doesn't even look up. "Read the sign."

The blinking lights throb and burn an afterimage on the back of Steve's retinas; his head feels hot, infected. He looks down, checking out the girl on the cover of *Playboy*—but she's brunette, not blonde. He doesn't bother finding out the names of the girls if they're not blonde. He knows what he likes.

"The next session," he hears himself say. "I'll get a ticket to that. Whatever."

"It's a double feature," drawls the seller, still focused on his porn. "Clint Eastwood's gonna beat the stuffing outta some *banditos*, then he's gonna beat the stuffing outta some gangsters. Pretty boy like you's got nothin' to worry about."

Steve almost swallows his tongue. "What—what did you say?"

A car backfires behind him, making him jump. Seized by supernatural precognition, Steve spins around—

No one there.

The ticket seller clears his throat expectantly. “Uh, that’ll be seven clams, my good man.”

“Sorry.” Steve looks back over his shoulder. “Misheard you.”

The smell of cigarette smoke, of stale popcorn and burning tire rubber, lingers in the air as he hands over the money.

“Whoa,” the seller says. His eyes are wide, giving Steve a slow, careful look. “Your eyes, man. Your eyes are all red. Whatever you’re on, I want some.”

“I haven’t slept in four days.”

“Oh, yeah.” The kid taps the side of his nose and winks; he doesn’t believe him. “I get like that, too.”

For a moment, Steve considers telling him the truth. Considers telling him: look man, it’s not worth it—stay in school, don’t do drugs. Not even the ones that seem harmless. He’d known Billy wasn’t harmless—known that from first-hand experience—but Billy was *something*, and he soothed the ache left by Nancy. Just a little something, right? Wrong. Before you know it, that little something becomes a big something and then it becomes an itch, a monkey that sits on your back and sucks the soul right out of your eyes—

“Clint Eastwood’s down the stairs to the left,” the seller says, placing his ticket on the counter.

If Billy were to come to Steve now, he wouldn’t even hesitate. In love or in hatred, Steve would turn around and welcome him with his arms thrown wide; he would open himself up and show Billy where to drive the knife. That’s it, baby, right there, *right there*. That sweet spot. Hurts so *good*, baby.

He counts the number of steps it takes for him to find his seat, but it doesn’t really matter—the theater is as dead inside as it is on the outside. In a year or two, Steve thinks, not right away but in a year or two, all of it will be gone. And then a year after that or more, another town will take its place.

“Real fucking mature, Harrington. You think you can just walk away when it suits you?”

Billy’s stalking down the stairs towards where Steve’s sitting at the front of the theater, silvery light bouncing off the screen and making him look ethereal, almost transparent. He’s moving in slow motion again, feet hardly touching the ground, because Steve has decided that this is all a dream, you see.

Billy thumps down in the seat next to him, throwing up the arm rest and sprawling his legs out so that his knee’s pressing against Steve’s. “We were having a *conversation*,” he says. Bratty, childish. If there’s one thing Billy hates, it’s being denied what he thinks he’s entitled to.

“Weren’t,” Steve says. “You were just trying to fight.”

He pushes the armrest back down and places his elbow on it, shoving Billy’s aside. Last line of defense.

“You left.” Billy’s arm is hanging off the head of his chair, and he’s looking at Steve—*really* looking at him, which isn’t surprising, because they’re in the dark now, and Billy has always felt more comfortable in the dark. It’s how Billy would come to him, after they’d brushed themselves off on the court and exchanged their usual jabs in the showers—always in the dark, as if it were a shield of immutable power. “You broke rule 1. We’re not meant to leave each other angry.”

“You left first.” On the screen, The Man with No Name is arguing with the *banditos* about a donkey. Why he has no name, Steve doesn’t know. He should ask Billy—Billy’s good with shit like that. He *should* ask Billy; he wants to. He wants it to be the way it was, before: with his body circled in Billy’s arms on Steve’s sofa, pressed up against his warm, broad chest, Billy feeding him popcorn from the microwaveable bag. Billy being pretentious on purpose, pronouncing the word *film* as ‘fill-um’ because it annoyed Steve to no fucking end. “*You left me, Billy.*”

His *fuck you* doesn’t need to be said; Billy understands.

Billy pushes the armrest back up, knee jostling into Steve’s space.

Steve draws his legs up, kicking them sideways across the empty row of the seats. Shoving the armrest back down, hard, so he can lay his head on it.

“I’m here now, alright?” Billy says. “Harrington—”

There’s a crackle of plastic as he throws something on Steve’s chest. Steve glances down, surprised, wary. “Red Vines?”

Billy says wryly, “Can’t watch a movie without ‘em.”

*That’s my line,* thinks Steve. He sits up, peeling open the packet with his fingertips. It’s true, he can’t watch a movie without Red Vines. Popcorn’s optional, but Red Vines are a necessity. “Coulda got me a drink,” he says. He’s earned the right to be petty, goddamn it.

Another rustle of plastic packaging. “You want tropical mango, or green apple?”

“Um, neither. Where’s the Coke?”

“Uh-uh. Coke’s for me,” Billy says, lips smacking as he sucks from the straw of said Coke. “You need to sleep. Tropical mango or green apple juice, Harrington, which is it?”

Steve considers for a second, then pushes the armrest up. “Mango,” he says. Then, for good measure, he adds: “Bastard.”

Maybe Billy smiles, and maybe it’s a soft smile, tender. Maybe it sets Steve’s heart beating like the first time he saw it, and maybe Billy’s fingers linger a second too long as he passes him the juice box, but it’s too dark to know for sure. “Just watch the damn movie, Steve.”

\*

Steve’s never been a morning person. Sleep leaves him in fits and starts; when he does wake, he feels almost water-logged with it, and it usually takes him a while to push himself fully out of that black tunnel, back to where the sun shines and the birds sing. When Steve opens his eyes and sees Billy’s still, sleeping face hovering over him, he wonders if he’s still dreaming. It all feels very real.

He doesn't move, knowing that the slightest shift of his body will make Billy open his eyes. Billy's a light sleeper; he'll be up and awake hours before Steve is, unable to ever truly come to a stop. Steve's always wondered if that's a learned behavior, too.

Light stabs painfully at the edges of his vision and he rubs his eyes. Movie credits are scrolling across the screen; he's slept through the entirety of *A Fistful of Dollars*, it looks like. Somewhere in between Steve's head ended up on Billy's lap, Billy's arm having fallen from the top of his chair to rest on his chest.

*He's made of glass, thinks Steve. If I move, if I touch him, he'll break, and I'll wake up for real. I'll wake up alone.*

When he looks up again, Billy's eyes are wide open. Alert, aware. Staring down at him.

"Fuck." Billy licks slowly at his lips, his teeth, and lifts his arm off Steve's chest to join the other in a stretch. "Were you watching me sleep?"

"No. Why would I do that?"

Billy chuckles, hand drifting back down to brush against Steve's sternum; then he seems to think the better of it. "Yeah, yeah, caught red-handed, pretty boy. It's okay. You can look, if you wanna. But you can't touch."

"Bastard," Steve says again. "Arrogant fucking bastard."

Billy's quiet, so quiet Steve can hear the movement of the breath in his lungs, pushing and pulling in a slow, ceaseless breeze. It's oddly intimate, being so close to someone that you can hear them breathing. The creak and tumble of Billy's organs, churning the blood to and from his heart like water through a wheel. "I know," he says.

The kiss is chaste, sweet; Billy presses it to the center of Steve's forehead, pushing his bangs back for better access. Steve thinks of the kisses he exchanged with girls in third grade, hurried, stolen kisses, broken by gleeful cries of *ew, cooties!*

"You ain't stupid," Billy says. His mouth tickles the skin between

Steve's eyebrows, so that Steve can feel the wonderful vitality of his body right over his face. He wants to sink into it, like it's a blanket. Alive, alive, alive.

"So why'd you say it?"

"Same reason I do anything." Billy shrugs his shoulders, tilting Steve's head off his lap. "'Cause I can."

*Control freak*, he thinks. Takes one to know one.

"Maxine thinks ... I can be better." The movie credits scrawl across Billy's face, reflecting back in his irises, turning them to white points of light. "Sometimes—sometimes I get it. Like, doin' something different, instead of—"

Steve straightens up a little, but not all the way; he doesn't want to leave the refuge of Billy's lap. "Do you want that?"

"Sometimes," Billy repeats; his voice is half a sigh, barely there. He lowers his head again, arms and legs curling in on themselves so that Steve's pressed against his chest, mouth brushing, but not quite touching, Steve's temples.

"I'm on your side," Steve whispers. "Don't push me away."

A low, wounded noise reverberates out of Billy's throat; his groin's moving against Steve's neck and Steve can feel how hard he is, hand ghosting over the dip of Steve's ribcage, searching, wanting. But not taking. Not until Steve moves.

Steve sits up, so that he's looking into the hot coals of Billy's eyes, fever-bright with pockets of endless need. The searching hand lands on his stomach, rucking up the hem of his shirt to push through the trail of hair surrounding his belly button. Steve's fingers are snagged on Billy's chin; all it takes is a light tug and Billy's tongue is sliding into his mouth, the need rekindled like a spark thrown onto dry tinder and beginning to burn.

"Fuck," Billy says, pulling away with a gasp. "Harrington, someone's gonna see us—"

“Since when have you cared about people seeing you?” Steve murmurs. He meets little resistance when he catches Billy’s mouth again, swallowing his moans down with ease. Billy’s hand is gripping the skin of his belly hard enough to hurt, and Steve places his own hand over it, pushing it lower, into the gap between his jeans and his underwear. So Billy can feel how much he needs him.

*Has needed, God. Billy has no fucking idea.*

“Not like that,” Billy pants against his lips. Every muscle in his body is writhing now, caught up in the epic tug-of-war between Billy’s two inner halves, what he wants and what he knows is the status quo, which is what he’s used to getting. “He’ll kill you.”

“I’m not afraid of your dad. I’ve faced worse.”

“Ever—” Billy groans openly as Steve pulls back the collar of his Alice Cooper shirt to suck at his neck. “Ever the optimist, aren’t you?”

“Have to be. Else I’ll go fucking crazy.” Steve bites down on Billy’s clavicle (*so thin*, his brain frets, *so thin so thin so thin*), then lifts his mouth when he realizes Billy’s stopped moving. “What, you think that’s stupid?”

Billy plants one of those sweet, chaste kisses on his cheek, startling him. “No. I think that’s brave.” He smiles into the next kiss, brushing his nose against Steve’s. “You’ve always been braver than me, Harrington.”

The credits have finished, the curtains drawing themselves over the screen and another, brighter light coming on over their heads, but Steve doesn’t notice it, and neither does Billy. Both sets of eyes are locked on the other as their faces come into sharp relief under the light, going from shades of black to gray and then, finally, color. Steve runs his fingers through Billy’s hair, pressing his nose to the skin behind Billy’s ear, smelling him, tasting him, just to make sure that part of him is still the same, even if the rest has taken a turn for the worst. Billy’s hips buck up, urgently seeking contact, but Steve doesn’t stop. This is ritualistic, too—it has to be done as a precursor to everything that will come after.

His touches are light, exploratory: touches to the indent above Billy's mouth, feeling at the stubble there. Lower, over his actual mouth, parting his lips and counting the glint of each tooth. Billy's tongue flickers out, unable to resist lapping at his finger, but Steve doesn't push inside—he just holds his finger in mid-air, fascinated by the feel of Billy's tongue taking him down to the second knuckle, cat-rough. "There," he says, and Billy stops. Billy's loose and obedient underneath him, face slack with an expression Steve can't quite place. Longing, maybe. Pain, too. Billy looks like the burden of everything he wants to say, should've said, is suffocating him, crushing him under its heel.

"Can I?" Steve asks, and Billy's chest trembles as he nods, arms tightening around Steve's waist.

Steve allows his hand to travel up and over Billy's eyelids, the skin delicate with web-like veins. The freckles on his nose have faded from the lack of sunlight, he realizes sadly. The magnitude of Billy's isolation hits him then—God, he thought *he* was alone, but Billy—Billy wouldn't have had a friend in the world.

"This is your heartline," he says. He's got Billy's hand trapped against his chest, spreading his fingers out and showing Billy the deep creases in his palms—feeling those creases for himself, each bone in his knuckles and every individual callus. "Your lifeline, too."

"You've been studying." Billy's voice is low, guttural with half-strangled desire, and it sends a shiver right between Steve's legs.

"I've been *reading*," he says, and Billy's hand winds out of his grip, coming up to fist in his hair. Billy kisses him hungry and sloppy, and Steve keeps his eyes open so he can learn the tiny line of dried blood on Billy's cheek from where he's cut himself shaving.

"So, you don't need me anymore? Is that what you're saying?"

"Oh, you still have your uses."

Billy's next kiss is more possessive, moving in time with the roll of his hips, a rough upwards thrust that has Steve gasping and slapping his hands down for balance. "Like what?"

“Come closer and I’ll show you,” he says.

Billy’s elbow knocks against the half-drunk cup of Coke, spilling sticky sweetness all over the seat and floor and Steve’s Nikes, but the breath he’d use to complain about this is gone, robbed by Billy’s ruthless, restless mouth. Stolen by Billy’s hands, tearing at his shirt so hard the buttons burst, pinging onto the row of seats behind him. Steve tries his best to stand his ground, to give back as good as he’s getting, but Billy’s hands are all-consuming, all over him and inside him at once and he’s getting swept up in the sensation, of how fucking good it feels to be wanted and needed after *so long*—

“The fuck,” Billy grunts. “Steve, what the fuck is this?”

He’s got Steve’s shirt, or what’s left of it, open, and is running one blunt finger across the scar under Steve’s nipple. It’s another old scar; Steve’s body is home to lots of them nowadays. Billy knows how much of a klutz he is—how he’ll come home from house parties with random bumps and scrapes from doing God knows what—but this scar is from something else. Billy knows that, too, even though he doesn’t know about the Demodogs.

“Remember when I got bitten by that dog a while back?”

He places his hands gently over his wrist, but Billy doesn’t relax, not even as Steve digs his fingers in. Instead, the muscles in his jaw work as he takes in the mottled expanse of Steve’s chest, the starburst-shaped scars on his shoulders where the Demodog pinned him to the rocks of Eel Race River.

“Nah, you were bitten on the other side,” Billy says, frowning. “I remember. *This* one, Steve—what’s *this*? ”

There’s no use lying to him. “I—uh, I got into a fight with Tommy.”

He expects Billy to laugh, to ruffle his hair and say something douchey like, *aw, didja at least manage to get a few licks in before he kicked your ass, Steverino?* but he doesn’t. If anything, Billy’s frown intensifies until it’s etched in every line of his face.

“Don’t do that,” he says gravely. “It’s not—it’s not *right*. ”

“What?”

“I’m the one who gets into fights,” Billy says, all in a huge rush. “You—Steve, you gotta look after yourself. I gotta have something when I come back, you know? God, *please* look after yourself. I can’t stand—fuck, you can’t—”

“Okay,” Steve says. “Okay, Billy.”

Billy draws in a breath, then lets it out, flattening his face against Steve’s belly. Hair silk-soft, the metal of his necklace scraping against Steve’s belt buckle. “Okay.”

“How could you tell?”

“Steve.” Billy doesn’t move his finger from Steve’s nipple, even as he lifts his head to roll his eyes at him. Like he can’t seem to stop himself from touching him, now that he is; like he’s checking to see that Steve’s real, that he’s really there. Steve’s the same; he presses closer, wanting Billy’s thumb to bruise, wanting his mark to be left along with all the rest. “I dreamed of you every single fuckin’ day I wore that ankle monitor. Only thing stopping me from stickin’ my head in the oven.”

Steve’s throat prickles with heat; he tries to swallow and only hears a dull, painful clicking, the sound of something contracting in his chest. Maybe it’s his heart.

“But it was the little things,” Billy goes on. “Devil’s in the details, you know? Maxine told me she saw you, that you were keeping the necklace on you like some sorta totem.” He laughs, a warm, fluttery sound, like a rising cloud of butterflies. “Kept me goin’, Stevie.”

“Wish you’d said something,” Steve says. “Wish you’d just told me to fuck off. I *needed* to hear you say something, I was so close to breaking the fucking window and—”

Billy laughs again. “And if I told you to fuck off, princess, would you have listened to me?”

“I—” Steve begins, but then he closes his mouth, because he knows Billy’s right. If Billy *had* answered the door that day, even if it was to

tell him to turn right back around and forget he even existed, Steve wouldn't have left. He would've stayed, the knowledge that Billy really was somewhere behind those curtained, nailed windows driving him to knock and knock and knock until he cracked and gone straight off the deep end. Billy knows him too well.

"Like I said," Billy says, sounding a little smug, a little sad. "You were better off not seein' me like that."

Steve cups his hands under Billy's cheekbones, feeling the uncharacteristic gauntness of them, sharp as arrowheads. "You don't seriously expect me to let you go back there after all this, do you?"

"Well, I gotta. No way around it. He ain't so bad," Billy leans in, pressing his forehead to Steve's. "At least I got the car back."

"That's not enough," Steve says. "Billy, it's not *enough*—"

"It has to be. Otherwise this can't work, Harrington. Don't look at me like that, you know I'm right." Billy bucks his hips again, gentler, a little playful. "In AA, they have this saying called the Serenity Prayer. It's about accepting what you can't change, and what you can. And having the wisdom to know the difference."

Steve stares at him, angry, incredulous—Billy stares right back, looking inexplicably, impossibly calm. Eyes half-lidded, almost sleepy, like this is some dumb conversation they're having while stoned and not a matter of literal life and death.

"He'll kill you," Steve says flatly. "You're at peace with that?"

"You're not listening to me." Billy shakes his head. "Look, I know how unpredictable he is, alright? Fuck, I *know* that. But that's the thing. That's why I'm the only person who can deal with him. We're kindred spirits, Neil and me. Hey," he says fiercely, closing his fingers around Steve's jaw, "trust me on this. Please."

*It's not enough*, Steve thinks helplessly. *You're not invincible.*

Other people might say the opposite; other people might say, now that Billy Hargrove, now he's got nine lives. He drinks, he fights, he bleeds, and he'll get up the next day to do it all over again. But Steve

knows the truth. Billy's just flesh and bone, meal fodder for a Demodog like everybody else.

"*Ste-eve.*" Billy's voice is magnetic, irresistible, luring his eyes upwards. "Fuckin' hell, I can hear you stressin' out from here."

"Yeah, why do you think that is, asshole? Because you're—"

Billy shuts him up by licking a slimy stripe across his mouth; spluttering, Steve reels backwards, but Billy's hands are already there at the small of his back, stopping him from tipping onto the carpet. Billy's hands hold him still as his tongue latches onto Steve's nipples, turning whatever protests he had into a single, drawn-out moan. "Stop thinking," he's murmuring. "Live a little."

He bites down, dragging his teeth over Steve's areola so harshly Steve almost shouts, thighs shaking from the effort of being planted on either side of Billy's hips. "You bastard," he says, "fuck, you're way too good at that—"

Billy huffs laughter; that makes number three, Steve thinks, tallying the sound. "Gotta remind you what you been missing out on, don't I?"

"Billy, you don't need to do any—"

Billy's hand slips down the back of his jeans, kneading at his ass with such bruising fervor Steve does cry out, this time. "Yeah, I do," he says. Pupils like black moons, welling dark and shiny and sultry under the border of his eyelashes as they stare up at Steve, fingers of his other hand straying to his belt.

Steve holds his breath as Billy circles his dick with his fist, and the rest of the world holds its breath with him; everything is utterly still, glass-like except for the sensual slide of skin, soft and hot and wet. It's with cotton in his ears and his mouth that Steve leans down, moaning, "Wanna touch you. Wanna feel you, Billy, come *on*—"

"You'll feel me." A creak of denim; the warm grip on him fades as Billy slides his hand back out of his jeans. Blinking the sweat from his eyes, Steve realizes Billy's pulling his own jeans down to his knees to

get at his cock, standing swollen and dripping against his belly. Billy's Adam's apple flexes as he swallows; he's holding himself almost tentatively, *shyly*, like he's forgotten what he's supposed to do next. "Christ, Steve. It's been so fucking long since I've blown a load I think I'm gonna—I don't think I'll last—"

"S'okay." Steve drops his head against Billy's shoulder and shifts so that they're closer together, using some of his wetness to slick them both up. "Just tell me what you want. Like this?"

Billy curses obscenely as Steve thrusts his hips, catching on both their cocks, head thudding back against the crest of the chair. "Yeah, yeah, fuck. Like this. You're perfect like this, baby. God, I missed you. I—fuck, lemme touch you. *Have* to let me touch you."

"Get on with it, cornball," Steve says, but he says it with a smile, wondering if he's already lost his fucking marbles, because his voice doesn't even sound like him, the smile doesn't even feel right on his face. It's been four months—a hundred and twenty-eight days, three thousand hours, almost a hundred and ninety-one thousand minutes, and eleven million seconds, yeah, *eleven million seconds*—and he never realized how resigned he'd been to an existence without Billy. That Billy's with him now—that Billy's kissing him and holding him and fucking running his tongue through the barren wasteland of scars on his chest, is like an iron on his soul, working out all the kinks.

Looking back at the Steve he'd been—a reckless Steve, a not-peachy Steve, a Steve whose only source of satisfaction was the systematic mutilation of his body from countless run-ins with Demodogs—is like looking at a stranger, alien, nonsensical. For the first time in a long time, Steve is awake, and it's not because of the pills. It's Billy—Billy and the magic of his mouth, breathing life into the places where death touched him with needle-sharp claws and planting flowers there.

No one walks in on them. No one comes to check that the theater's clean for the next session, that there's no horny teenagers necking in the back rows—the lights go down and *Dirty Harry* starts playing but the sound of it is thin and whispery, like they're listening to it from the other end of a tin tube, and Steve wonders, fleetingly, if this is another Upside-Down they've fallen into, a twilight reality separate

from all the rest.

They rock together, as if taken by the waves. Steve used to dream of waves—blood-soaked, horrifying dreams that'd leave him gasping and on the verge of tears upon waking. Dreams where Barb would be the lone piece of driftwood floating in those waves, her face half-eaten away and her eyes blazing like deranged lamps under the glow of his pool lights. If Barb was the beginning of it all, does that mean Billy is the end? God, Steve hopes so. He's so fucking tired of fighting.

Devil's in the details, Billy said—and it's on the back of these details that Steve's orgasm gallops through him, coming too fast and too hard for his brain to tally them all: the wetness of Billy's face from sweat and maybe something else, something like salt; the tightening of his hands on the backs of his legs, chafing at his skin in the way that only Billy can; how the tendons in his neck strain taut as steel cords when he comes. The barely-contained darkness of his eyes, punch-drunk and hazy. The way they seem drawn to Steve's entire being, unwilling to look away for even a second. They're details Steve will fold up and keep in some special place inside him; a snapshot saved for a rainy day.

\*

If Billy's drunk, his driving doesn't show it. Steve tails him in his BMW on the way back to Hawkins, waiting for the Camaro's wheels to slip over the dividing strip in the middle of the road—or worse, go spinning off to the side and into a tree.

It doesn't.

By the time they reach the cornfield, the sunset's a bloody egg yolk on the horizon, gluggy and half-aborted. The yellow light falls upon Billy's hair as soon as he steps out of the Camaro, setting it ablaze like the head of a match; for a moment, Steve thinks the light's going to burn him up, that when he opens his eyes Billy will be nothing but a ring of smoke, disappearing into the corn.

It doesn't.

Fossilized corn husks crackle under Billy's Converse as he steps onto the side of the road, an empty bottle of Jack Daniels clutched in his hand. There's a bouquet of wildflowers shoved down its neck, and Steve wants to ask.

He doesn't. Not until he sees the cross.

Painted white and laden with tributes, it stands in the shadow of the corn, one of those roadside oddities that, driving past at seventy miles an hour, most people would miss. Steve sees the tatters of a teddy bear, fur muddy and windblown, the trampled remains of flowers, pink stationery taped to the arms of the cross next to photographs of a smiling woman, brown with age and rain. He steps closer, trying to read the sentences that leap out at him at intervals: *rest in peace angel, we miss you, we'll never forget you, mommy and daddy love you.*

"Who was she, Billy?"

Billy hunkers down on his knees, scraping at the dirt with his hands to create a shallow depression beneath the cross. He buries the bottle of Jack there, piling dirt around the base, a makeshift vase.

"I don't know," he says. "Some drunk out-of-towner, someone who didn't know the roads. Thought the cross was for a scarecrow, first time I saw it. Whole highway's full of 'em." He's silent for a moment, then says: "Wonder if she had a kid."

There's no wind, but the corn rustles with some secret life force; it sounds like it's whispering to them.

"How long you been comin' out here, huh?" Steve asks.

"Not long. I ... don't like it here."

He wouldn't, thinks Steve; it's too open, too exposed. Billy's grown up under a sky interrupted by the shapes of skyscrapers, the hum of civilization a constant comfort. Steve doesn't like the idea of Billy coming out here, standing alone under the stretch of an infinite horizon, with nothing but the corn and the crows for company.

"So why come out here?" The corn wavers back and forth over his

shoulder, the sound skeletal, dry as a bone. Whispering, whispering like the prayers of the devout.

“My mama never had a grave,” Billy says. “She just—up and ran one day. Not even her own son could stop her from leavin’, can you believe it?”

He stands up, stepping closer to Steve so that they’re standing side-by-side. Billy’s eyes have taken on that otherworldly, feverish light again; they’re beautiful, but disconcerting at the same time.

“When you’re that young,” he says, “you can’t even think about death as a concept, man. You just think people go away. I used to make up stories about it. I’m good at telling stories, talkin’ shit. I told myself she turned to sea foam. Like in that fairytale.”

It rings a bell, but Steve’s not sure. His mom never read him stories; that was a job for the nanny.

He can see the first outlines of stars forming above the cornfield, shimmering in the darkening sky like pale wraiths. Venus is the brightest; it glitters like a sapphire to the west, the perfect shade of blue.

“I was her water baby,” Billy says then, hushed, like a secret. He drops his cigarette onto the road and spits, a wad of saliva that lands somewhere near the front wheel of the Camaro. “Jesus, what a place to die, huh? Out in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere, with the smell of cow shit in your nostrils. What a fucking fucked up way to go.”

Steve stretches out a hand, meaning to slip it into Billy’s back pocket and pull him close, the way he would in the time of Before, but—but Billy falls through his fingertips like grains of sand, moving towards the wooden cross until he looks almost dwarfed by it, the wall of corn dense enough to swallow him whole.

“This is when you scare me,” says Steve. “It sounds like you’ve thought about it.”

“I think about a lot of things. Lots of time to think, when you can’t do anything else. Lots of time spent up here, with little old me.” Billy

taps the side of his head with his fist. Pressing for a half-second before lowering his hand. Slow, almost absent, as if he's sleepwalking.

Jane's a sleepwalker, too; she'd barely flinched when they'd gotten to the part where King Oedipus tears his eyes out, but when Steve read her *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, she'd screamed out in her sleep for nights afterwards. *The youngest goat never made it over the bridge*, she'd cried, *the troll ate him*, and Steve had had to assure her no, that's not how the story goes; all three billy goats make it across, and the troll falls into the water, remember?

"Thought about how much time I wasted givin' you shit," Billy says, "when I could've been doing a million other things. Kissing, fucking, makin' you laugh. I'm good at that, too. I can be. But I fuck around too much. Fuck with people."

"We got time," he says. "We got time now."

"What if we didn't?" The question lashes at Steve's face like the crack of a whip, making him take a wincing step backwards. "What if—what if I went to juvie, and all I'd done was give you shit that you didn't even *need*? 'Cause I thought about that, too. I thought ... I thought I couldn't forgive myself, if they put me away and that was all you had of me. Fuck, I don't even know what your favorite fucking *color* is. All that *time*, Harrington, and I never—"

"My favorite color's between green and blue," interrupts Steve. "A happy medium."

When Billy looks at him again, his mouth is stretched into a smile that Steve's never seen before: soft and dreamy and so very young. "My mama's eyes were like that. You'd look at them and realize that you didn't know what color they were, 'cause sometimes they were green, but sometimes, in light like this—" he gestures up at the sky, "they'd be blue."

"Was she beautiful?"

He's thinking that Billy's mom would've had to be, to have given birth to him.

Oh, sure, Billy's dad is handsome—but it's unkind, the angles of his face; meager, ratty, like that of an old, starved coyote.

"She was. I dunno what she's like now." Billy spits again, hands coming down to rest on the tops of his knees; for a moment, Steve thinks he's going to throw up. "Harrington," Billy says, swaying on his feet, dark hair hanging in his eyes, "Do you think we could've been friends if—if I didn't—you know."

"If you didn't what?"

"If I didn't drag you down."

Steve blinks. "You don't—wait, what?"

"You heard me." Billy straightens up with a sigh, like he knows Steve's being deliberately obtuse. "I'm not good for you. Not good for anybody. I put my mama through a twenty-four-hour labor, and even then, I wouldn't come out. They had to cut her open, my dad told me —"

"What else did he tell you?" It startles Steve, the hardness in his voice. "That you drag people down? That I don't want you around?"

Billy's smile turns crooked, his teeth carving a mean white slash through his face. "I can be hard to love."

*I'm Neil's little doll, Max had told Steve. He likes to dress me up.*

The words don't sound organic, coming from Billy's mouth; they sound like they're repeated from somewhere else, like Billy's heard them, written them down, ingrained them under his skin like invisible tattoo ink. The other doll. Pull the string and hear the pre-programmed phrases pour from his lips, watch him spin and dance and fall down. Like clockwork, see?

Steve feels sick.

"It's why she left, you know," Billy tells him. Not smiling anymore. "My dad, he—he has pretty mixed feelings about it, obviously. One minute she's a lying whore, the next she's the love of his life, the one that got away. When he's like that ... that's when he likes to tell me it

was *my* fault. That I was too much, too—just too *everything*—”

“You aren’t,” Steve says. Three steps and he’s at Billy’s side, wrapping his hand around his wrist. It’s like touching the skin of a corpse; Billy’s cold, stiff, and that scares Steve more than anything. “Billy, listen to me—”

“I wear people out. Wear you out, too. Make you wonder where it all went wrong—”

“No, Billy. Listen to me.” Is this why Billy never called him, never warned him? Billy, who seems to absorb everything Steve ever says to him and dwells on it for days afterwards, even after Steve’s forgotten about putting his foot in his mouth? “*You’re not a deficit.*”

Billy laughs, but it sounds more like he’s choking back a sob. “Rose-colored glasses, Harrington.”

“Fuck you,” Steve says angrily. “I’m not some lovesick *girl*, alright? I know what you can be like. But you’re not the only one. I got my own shit, too. And I still made the choice to be here. *With you.*”

“My dad said—”

“—and you believed him?”

The breath hitches in Billy’s chest; somewhere in the corn, a crow cackles like a woman gone senile. Billy looks hopelessly up at the cross and says, “He’s my fucking *dad.*”

The sobs are dry, void of actual tears—in fact, they hardly qualify for sobs, the way they rattle out of Billy’s throat, breathless and silent and shaking. Steve catches hold of him before he can turn and run—he sees Billy whirl around, blurry, twisting like he’s going to ball his fists in Steve’s shirt and *snap*, because Billy hates being restrained, Billy almost headbutted him one time when Steve held his hands behind his back during sex without asking him—but then he feels Billy’s body fold against him, feels the sobs take over until they wrack his body like storms, until he’s so close Steve can feel his heart fluttering in his chest like the wings of a bird he’s caught in his fist, desperately trying to free itself so it can fly straight into the fucking

sun and bash its brains out on the black and blue eye of the sky but Steve doesn't—he can't, won't ever—let go.

\*

Jane's stayed up for him. She's curled up in the camping chair Steve bought for her by the smoking remains of the fire, slippered feet hanging over the arm. Tucking his unlit cigarette behind his ear, Steve picks his way around the coals and nudges at the book she's got in her lap: *The Little Mermaid*, by Hans Christian Andersen.

"You're too smart for your own good, baby-o," he says.

She tilts the book up so that he can't see her face; just the woolen bobble of her beanie nodding as she turns a page. "The girls at school don't think so."

Steve sits down on the chair next to her and pulls out his lighter. 'The girls' could only mean Katie Walsh, Tina Walsh's little sister. He's never met her, but he's heard stories. Dustin absolutely despises Katie and her group of friends; something about a fake love confession staged in front of the whole middle school cafeteria. "They bully you?"

The book shoots down so fast Steve has to lean back to avoid getting hit in the nose by the hard edge of it. "No," Jane says reproachfully, "I don't care, anyway. I have you. I have *Jim* and *Mike* and—and—"

"You'd think being the daughter of the police chief would scare them off," he says.

She gives an irritated shrug of her shoulders. "Don't care. I have it just *fine*. But Max—Max, she—"

"What do they say about her?"

"It's a bad word." Jane lifts the book back over her face, as if embarrassed. "Rhymes with witch."

*Kids*, thinks Steve, exhaling. He can't remember girls ever being that mean when he was in middle school. But he was never a girl himself, so. "Well, I could talk to them. Give 'em a little once-over with the

bat ...”

“Steve.” Jane sounds like she’s smiling. “You’re so funny.”

“Like a ha-ha funny or a *ha-ha* funny? Because, you know, they’re two very different things—”

“You just are. You’re *you*.” And then she’s leaning across to wrap her arms around his neck in a quick, warm hug. Steve coughs on smoke, raising his hand to awkwardly pat her on the head. Jane’s still smiling when she pulls away, *The Little Mermaid* clutched to her chest. “It’s going to be alright,” she assures him.

*Don’t make promises you can’t keep*, he thinks, but doesn’t say. Taking another drag of the cigarette, he turns his attention to the fire, picking up the poker off the ground and shoving it amongst the coals until a spark catches and flames start climbing into the air, embers casting weird, dancing shapes against the trunks of the trees.

“It’s better now,” Jane says softly.

“Now,” Steve says. He casts the poker aside and pulls a branch out of the fire. The end of it is black and smoking, but it’s a good piece of wood, he thinks; solid. It’d be a shame to burn such a good piece of wood.

Jane hesitates, then says, “Better than killing Demodogs.”

He can’t argue with her on that one; anything’s better than killing Demodogs. “Yeah.”

She leans towards him, her eyes wide and staring. The flickery light shifts over her face, orange and then red and then black. Jane breathes in and the fire jumps higher, lengthening and wavering in her direction like the flaming bodies of snakes; as if she’s using the fire to see with, and what she’s seeing is Billy’s necklace sitting under Steve’s sweater, resting right over his heart. “William,” she says. “Billy-Buster-shitbird—” Her upper lip trembles. “*Water baby*.”

“Do you have a mom, Jane?”

Jane makes a vague flying-away gesture with her hands. “Gone now.”

Then she seems to snap out of it, her gaze zeroing in on Steve's face with sudden sternness. Channeling Hopper to a T. "Keep it safe."

Steve fidgets, drawing in the ground with the burnt end of the stick, crossing and uncrossing his legs underneath him. Billy had handed the necklace back to him once they'd entered Hawkins; had made him promise that he'd keep it safe, because sometimes his dad gets in a mood and doesn't like looking at anything that reminds him of his first wife.

Watching Billy walk down the driveway of number twelve, Cherry Road was one of the hardest things Steve had ever done in his life. But Billy—Billy had just smiled with his usual easy nonchalance and told him to stop being such a mom, 'cause they're sleeping together, and he doesn't want to feel like he's fucking his mom, *Jesus Christ*, Harrington.

"Sometimes people have to leave so they can come back," Jane says.

*How long, Jane?* Steve wants to ask her. *How long have you been waiting for all yours to come home? What if she never does?* "Still fucking blows, though."

"Carve something," she suggests. "You miss it."

Steve balances the branch on his knees. "I miss bein' a kid."

"*Are a kid.*"

"I feel older." He pulls at the skin around his eyes and sticks out his tongue to blow a raspberry at her; she giggles. "Alright, fine. You want me to carve something for you?"

"Something nice," she says, all serious again. "Something good."

Steve watches her features roam under the touch of the flames, morphing her face into an entity young, then old. Naïve, then wise. Looking at him like that, Jane seems like she's grown a hundred feet tall, cupping Steve in the palms of her hands and asking him, *Do you understand now? Do you see?*

"Somethin' good," he repeats, Billy's necklace warm on his skin. Billy

had promised him; he'd told Steve he would come back, but only if Steve would be there for him when he did. Billy has this way of making Steve believe anything's possible, even if it isn't. "Yeah, okay. That we can do."

## 4. Chapter 4

### IV

*Lazy head. 21 DAYS SINCE LAST INCIDENT. H for HAPPY.  
Psychosomatic.*

“Wake up, lazy head!”

A bar of strong sunlight flares underneath Steve’s eyelids. He responds with a low, strained groan, pulling the comforter up in a vain bid to shield himself from the intrusion.

“Lazy bones,” he slurs out. “It’s *lazy bones*, Jane, not *lazy head*—”

He groans again as the sleeping bag is yanked rudely out of his grip, exposing his bare legs to the air.

“Lazy head,” Jane chants. “Sleepy bones. Hazy lead. Bleepy sones—*wake up!*”

“Alright, alright, *alright*. Don’t get your trousers in a twist. Jeez.” Steve feels blindly for Billy’s side of the mattress, thinking that if he can find that warmth and bury his face in it, then he’ll be sleep for just a *little* longer—but Billy’s side is empty, sheets pulled back and left all in a jumble.

Steve’s eyes snap open at once. Jane’s face is a blob above him, made blurry and indistinct by the dimness of the tent. “Where—?”

The Jane-blob smiles at him, silent and mysterious, then turns and ducks back outside. Steve hates it when she does that.

He drags his fingers through his hair and down over his face, giving his cheeks a couple of light slaps—wake up, *wake up*—before forcing himself to stand, mattress wobbling under his weight. His sweatpants have somehow ended up at the opposite end of the tent; his T-shirt,

lost to the whirlwind of blankets on the bed. Steve dresses quickly and inattentively, fingers shaky with nervous energy.

The sunlight envelops him when he steps outside, so bright and dazzlingly warm that it takes a few seconds for his brain to piece together his surroundings into a comprehensive picture; he can just make out the figure of Jane crouched by the fire pit, tossing sacrificial effigies of twigs and crumpled up newspaper onto the flames.

“Jane,” he says, shielding his eyes with his hand. “What date is it?”

She counts on her fingers. “October twelfth.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” she says, and Steve frowns doubtfully at her, certain she’s pulling his leg. “We have this conversation every day, Steve. It’s *October*. You’re not dreaming.”

“I know, but—” *You could be awake*, he wants to tell her, *or it could just be too good to be true. How do you really know?* “It’s too warm.”

Too warm for October, too warm for Hawkins in general. They should be having shorter days, days when it gets dark at four o’clock in the afternoon, the shadows stretching long and stick-thin over the ground as the bitter teeth of winter sets in. Days when the trees grow bare and stark under a blood-red sky and the wind curls in the eaves of his parents’ house like a living thing, breathing slow and deep through the night.

The sky above him isn’t red, but a vivid, peacock-blue, sprinkled with the faintest traces of scudding clouds. Steve squints up at it like an underground creature that’s come out of a long hibernation; he can’t remember the last time he saw a sky that blue. If it’s not a dream, then it’s the universe’s idea of a sick, twisted joke: a mockery of a sky just like the Demogorgon’s four mouths are a lunatic mockery of a human face. How else do you explain the pollen that’s floating on the breeze like celebratory ticker-tape, mingling with the columns of smoke streaming from the fire pit? The sunlight dancing over the skin of his arms, strange and new and sweet? *How, Jane?*

“You slept in,” Jane says. She levitates another branch onto the fire, sending up a vortex of swirling orange sparks; the resulting rush of heat is so powerful Steve has to take a step back. “Blue’s been waiting for you. *All day.*”

Loud as a pistol shot, a sudden, ringing *CRACK!* booms through the campsite, and Steve turns around just in time to see the flash of an axe blade embed itself in the fallen trunk of a dead tree. There’s another loud *CRACK!* and the wood splits down the middle, kneeling over to land with a juddering crash on the forest floor. As if sensing Steve’s stare, Billy—*holy shit, Billy*—looks up.

“Hey, dickhead,” Steve calls out. “You wearing protection? You’re gonna get splinters.”

“I got a splinter for you right here.” Billy motions with his hand pressed over his crotch; as always, his mouth is open and his tongue is out, wagging with silent mirth as Steve draws closer, moving like there’s an invisible pulley attached to his T-shirt and he can’t possibly alter its course; he all but collides into Billy, causing him to stagger back with a grunt of pleasure. “Mornin’.”

“Morning,” says Steve breathlessly. Billy’s hair is wet, dripping water down his bare shoulders in temping trails; he reaches out and twists a lock of it around his finger, marveling at the color. It’s much lighter now, more cornsilk than honey. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.”

Billy nuzzles his neck affectionately. “Speak for yourself, Sleeping Beauty.”

He slides his hands around Steve’s waist to fondle at his ass, searching for where he’s still wet, still sensitive and—*oh*, now Steve remembers why his sweatpants were on the other side of the tent this morning. Quickly, before all the blood can rush to his face and his dick, he hisses: “Hey. Not in front of the kid, you perv—”

“She ain’t lookin’ at us.” Holding his tongue between his teeth, Billy sets the axe down and backs Steve into the towering shadow of the wood pile, hands a warm, heavy weight under his ass, squeezing, teasing.

“You know you she doesn’t need to look. And that reminds me—”

Steve would’ve kept talking, but then Billy kisses him with all his might, turning the rest of his sentence into a vacuum of lost air. Billy’s arms, brown as the Californian Redwoods he’s told Steve so much about, prop him up effortlessly against the wood pile, and Steve lets himself sink all the way into it, this smell of Billy that’s entirely new but also familiar at the same time: pine and woodsmoke, earthy and aromatic and intense. “*That reminds me,*” Steve says with gasp and a moan, leaning back out of Billy’s reach and hoping he looks disapproving, instead of winded and kiss-bitten. “You’ve been teaching her the wrong words again. *Lazy bones*, not lazy head.”

“Aw.” A soft, lazy smile spreads across Billy’s face as he lifts his fist and plants it on the block of wood next to Steve’s head; he doesn’t look the least bit sorry. “That doesn’t sound like something *I* would do.”

“Please. You’re a bad influence on her.”

“Yeah? How bad, Harrington?”

Without warning, Billy hoists Steve onto his waist, crossing his ankles over the small of his back and angling his hips so that their groins are pressed together. Sucking on his lip, Steve watches Billy watch *him*, eyes travelling over his mouth, down to the line of his exposed throat. Billy’s still smiling that easy, lazy smile, but his eyes are feline, bright with awareness. Watching Steve the way a cat might watch a mouse-hole, tail batting patiently from side to side. Waiting for him to let his guard down.

“Steve.” Billy leans in and Steve sucks on his lip harder, biting back the whimper that threatens in response; he can feel, rather than see, Billy’s teeth hovering a hair’s breadth above his pulse. “*How bad?*”

“You’re *so* bad,” he mutters, legs trembling, and the deadly patience in Billy’s eyes turns knife-sharp, feral.

“That’s not what you were telling me last night.” Billy dips low, curling his body against Steve’s and then up again, grinding their hips in unison. Steve fits a desperate hand between them and finds

that the tab of Billy's jeans is unbuttoned; he's not wearing any underwear. He would've swum in the river naked while Steve was still asleep, his body floating light and unburdened in the current—as if echoing that thought, Billy raises his voice to a moaning, girlish falsetto: “*Oh yeah do me do me Billy fuck yeah you're so good—*”

“Shut up. *Shut up.*” Steve punches the back of Billy’s shoulders. “Jesus fucking Christ, do you have any common decency?”

Billy’s laughter arcs up into the trees, loud and joyful and free. “Only one way to make me be quiet, babe. C’mon, you know what it is.”

“No, no, nuh-uh, no fucking way. There’s nothing you’ve done to deserve—”

“*DO ME, BILLY!*” Billy shrieks, dissolving into more laughter as Steve rams a sweaty palm over his mouth, the two of them sliding off the wood pile to collapse on the ground. Fallen leaves carpet Billy’s shoulders in a red-gold cape as he folds Steve’s fingers in half, bestowing kiss after kiss on his knuckles like they’re something precious. In the sun-dappled gloom, his eyes look green, not blue; mermaid-eyes, Steve remembers. Water baby.

“Tea time,” Jane says, but Steve doesn’t hear her.

He has to kiss Billy back in the end, because that’s the only way to really get him to shut up, because Billy doesn’t give him a choice, not when he looks like he does now: face freckled and rosy-cheeked as a cherub’s, sun-bleached hair pillowing around his shoulders, eyes glittering like multicolored dragonfly wings. Steve kisses him the way you might pinch yourself when you’re not sure you’re dreaming; he kisses Billy to wake himself up, certain that Billy’s still going to fade away like snow on the first day of spring as soon as he opens his eyes. It’s October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1985, meaning that it’s been three weeks, seventeen days, a hundred and thirty hours, and a hundred thousand seconds since Billy came back.

*TEA TIME!* Jane’s voice comes down like an invisible fist, blowing them apart; sending Steve flying off Billy’s chest and onto his back, clumsy as a flicked bug, disoriented. “Are you *done?*” Jane demands out loud from somewhere to his left. “You promised!”

“Shit,” Steve hears Billy gasping. “Shit, Steve—the runt’s bleeding.”

“It’ll—it’ll stop,” he says. Rolling over so that he’s able to push himself to his knees, waiting until his vision clears before staggering to his feet. “Jane. What did I tell you about cheating, huh?”

“Blue said we were going for a swim,” Jane says petulantly; she’s standing with her hands pressed over her eyes, the tips of her ears flaming red. “I’ve been *waiting*.”

“Funny.” Steve looks over at Billy, who’s still on his knees, head tilted to one side; he knows it’s to get rid of that swooping, nauseous feeling Jane leaves you with sometimes, like motion sickness. “She blamed you for not being able to wait.”

“You traitor,” Billy accuses, and Jane answers him with an annoyed huff, arms coming up to fold themselves over her chest.

“Tea first. *Then* we swim.” She purses her lips threateningly, as if daring someone to argue with her. “No excuses.”

Billy grousing, “Runt, I don’t drink no fucking tea,” and Steve shoots him a look that says, *just go with it*.

As Jane leads them back to the campsite, a strange, throbbing pulse rises out of the trees. Steve tenses, thinking it’s not one, not two, but a whole swarm of Demodogs—that Jane’s feelers have accidentally thrown him right out of his body and back into the tunnels, Dustin sobbing and clinging onto his waist as the darkness around them came alive with teeth and claws—but then he sees the small, black shapes zooming up into the sky, and the realization shocks him to a halt: cicadas. Cicadas, buzzing and humming and sighing from every direction, rubbing their legs together in glorious, seductive harmony.

Five months ago, he and Jane would hike through these very woods and not hear the cicadas for miles around; it’d been like walking inside a blown lightbulb, everything silent and gray and cold. This total absence of life had made Steve think it *was* all dead—that he was too late, that the tunnels had finally speared right into the heart of Hawkins and there was nothing he could do to jumpstart it.

And then Billy came back, bringing summer with him.

They haven't seen a Demodog in or around Eel Race River since.

\*

"I don't know," Jane says.

"Whaddya mean, you don't know? You were all gung-ho about it before," Steve says. He's got his mug of tea in his lap and his Ray-Bans perched on his head, and he's feeling a little self-conscious of how pale and veiny his legs look, clad in a brand-new pair of swim trunks. One always feels a little self-conscious, when they're in the same vicinity as Billy.

"You don't have to stay in," Billy tells her. "Just duck your head under."

Jane leans over the edge of the rock, peering down her nose at the choppy surface of the river. There's no hint of an expression on her face save for her eyebrows, bunched together in that way she has when she's trying not to look as afraid as she feels. "*I can't.*"

Billy's knees pop dryly as he lowers himself down, putting their faces at eye-level. "What are you so afraid of?"

Jane shifts anxiously from foot to foot, scratching at a half-healed welt on her elbow. She was stung by a yellow jacket while trawling the shoreline about a week ago, and Hopper's given Steve an ultimatum: either find and destroy the nest, or Jane won't be camping with them until next summer. That his biggest problem nowadays is an infestation of *wasps*, rather than man-eating monsters from another dimension, is fucking unbelievable in retrospect, but Steve's not complaining. If he does, he'll jinx it for sure. "Not being able to see the bottom," Jane says.

"We won't go out deep," Billy assures her. "Chest height, like up to here." He shows her with his hand. "Can you do that?"

"I don't *know*." Jane's voice is thin and breathless, lurching towards the pitch of a scream.

Steve puts his mug down. “On second thought, maybe we shouldn’t —”

But Billy, always two steps ahead, just waves him away. “It’s okay, runt.” He extends his hand and gently takes Jane’s wrist; Steve sees her eyes flash with a familiar ruthless edge, like she’s either going to run for it or raise total hell—but then Billy drops his fingers to the water, scooping up a handful and ladling it slowly over the top of her palm. “It’s okay. You feel that? How warm it is? It’s just water. It can’t hurt you.”

“I don’t want to put my head under,” Jane says in a small, teary voice. Her shoulders are rigid with tension, but Steve notices that she doesn’t pull her hand away, nor does she try to shirk the water trickling over her fingers. “Please don’t make me.”

“I’m not gonna make you do anythin’ you don’t want to do.” Billy stands up, keeping their hands clasped. “But I’m gonna need you to breathe for me. In through your nose and out through your mouth. Okay?”

“You gotta trust him, Jane,” Steve says. “He was swimming before he could walk. In SoCal everyone’s born with a tail.”

Jane scrunches her face at him. “They are *not*. You made that up.”

“How do you know he did?” Billy says, with a charming grin. “*Breathe*, runt. We’re going in on the count of three. One, two—”

Jane jolts in surprise as Billy scoops her up by the backs of her legs, lifting her high above his shoulders. “No! I’m going to fall—”

“You’re not. Put your legs around my back. Harder, you’re not gonna hurt me. That’s it, that’s *it*,” Billy says, and Jane’s chin flickers uncertainly towards the water, now inches from her toes. “Hey, don’t look down! Keep your eyes on me.”

“Who knew you were so good with kids,” says Steve, grinning when Billy flips him the finger.

“Don’t get your hopes up, Harrington. I’m not adopting the whole fucking litter.”

"Just the ones you like," Jane says cheekily, and if she'd been anybody else, Billy would've given a contemptuous snort, might've even dropped her or held her head under until she cried uncle—but he doesn't. He just wades further into the river, keeping his grip steady on her legs. Standing watch next to Jane's rolled up towel and sneakers, Steve has a moment of surrealistic perspective; wasps are one thing, but Billy teaching Jane how to swim is a moment he never factored into the scheme of things, never would've even *considered* a year ago. They make an odd trio, seemingly mismatched at first glance; you'd think that it'd feel like they're the ones who've adopted her, but really, it's more like Jane's adopted *them*—on their bad days, when everything Steve says to Billy comes out wrong, or doesn't help, only makes it worse, Jane will be able to reach down into the cellars of Billy's soul and pry out whatever dark and sticky ugliness might be lodged there, lurking like a malignant tumor. Bearing witness to this gradual interchange of trust-giving and -taking, Steve feels like he's finally found the middle of a word he didn't even realize he was missing, but now he understands, now he can *read*—and he's never been more relieved.

\*

Back in the time of In-Between, when Billy was gone and it was like trudging through the swamp of a slowly unfurling nightmare, a trick room where all the doors were locked or had no handles or Steve himself was suddenly too large to fit through them—he would think about all the things he never said, and the things he *did* say, to his regret. He would think about the if-onlys—if only he'd been more patient, more understanding; if only Billy were here now to hear it pour from his lips like a sinner in confessional. He dreamed—fantasized—of a time when Billy would come back so he could be relieved of this terrible, immense burden; for regret's shackles are heavy, and he's seen what it does to other people. People like his parents, for example: he's seen the way it's aged his mom's face, highjacked his dad's mouth and become the building block around which they shaped their entire marriage. Steve's too young for that. He promised himself he would be free of regret, once he saw Billy again. Then he could make it *right*.

It's After, now, three weeks after, and they don't talk about it. Not

about how much Steve was hurting, and how much Billy still hurts. The things Steve wanted to say and never did—and he wrote it all out in his mind, practiced it the way one might practice sentences of a new language they're trying to learn, *I missed you* and *I missed you* and *I missed you* and *if I told you I love you, is that enough to make you stay?*—have vanished from the tip of his tongue. In the time Of, when Billy left, Steve had lost his head; he'd lost his heart. He has his heart back, and his head, too (although it might be screwed on the wrong way, 'cause he still doesn't sleep), but now, damn it, *now* he's lost his voice. He doesn't talk to Billy about the time In-Between. Instead of repeating to Billy the words he's practiced for months, he tells himself that Billy needs space. He tells himself to wait.

IRONY. Five letters, but Steve wouldn't be able to tell you what color it is. *Can you use it in a sentence?* he would ask, every time Nancy tested him. Nervous, on uncertain footing, sure that he was misspelling it; he hates surprises. The word IRONY feels like the snide 'gotcha!' that comes with the worst surprises.

They don't talk about it. Instead, Steve picks Jane up from the middle school on Friday afternoons with Hopper's permission; they eat an early dinner at the KFC on the outskirts of town, Jane's table manners having only marginally improved over five months. He makes sure they get to their campsite before sunset, so that they're not putting the tents up in the dark and Billy can spot the tiny carved lion Jane's left in the hollow of a tree next to the turn-off.

Well, Steve insists it's a lion, but no one believes him. Billy says it looks more like a cross between a cat and a demented sloth. Jane calls them her familiars; she puts one by her bedside every night, telling Steve it scares the trolls away. When they pack up the campsite come Sunday, she'll leave another by the empty fire pit, as if blessing the place.

If Billy's hurting, Steve tells himself, it wouldn't do any good to force him to talk about it. Instead, a new routine forms from the ashes of the first: pick up Jane. KFC. Tents. Billy. Morning: chop the firewood, save the smaller branches to whittle at with the pocket-knife Hop's lent him, fellow Boy Scout alumni. Jane's right; Steve *has* missed it, but even more importantly, it gives his brain something to worry at on nights when Billy can't come. Nights Billy calls *family time*, the

words twisting and coiling in his mouth like the stinger of a scorpion's tail, black and dripping with venom.

Soon, Jane has an entire menagerie of wooden lions and cats, and yeah, fine, demented sloths that she keeps caged inside a Barbie lunch box. Steve's still not as skilled with the knife as he used to be, and his edges are clumsy, harboring a danger of splinters, but they all agree it's a better hobby than killing Demodogs.

When he *does* see Billy—and it's not something either of them can predict or control, when Billy can come and when he can't—the time In-Between hulks overhead, shadowy. Steve doesn't tell Billy he still keeps the nail bat under a tarp in the trunk of his car. Billy's made him promise: no more getting into fights. No more nights spent pacing his room, counting every strange noise he hears in the walls. Billy made him promise he'll throw the bat in the river, and Steve will, he just—you never know, right? He hasn't seen a Demodog since September, but he'd rather be safe than sorry.

The suspiciously not-October heat has caused Hawkins to crack and burst wide open like a chestnut roasting over a naked flame, bringing out the overlapping textures and sounds of living things: that funny, ashy taste around Eel Race River is gone, replaced by cicadas nesting in the long grass, the black commas of tadpoles squirming in the mud, Jane standing with her sleeves rolled up over her elbows as she cranes her neck and dips the pole of her net, like a stork striking out for food. Yellow jackets buzz excitedly from tree to tree, and under the touch of the sun, Billy flourishes. He piles the weight back on with breakneck speed, thickening his waist and thighs, filling out the hollows in his cheeks, broadening the muscles in his back until every inch of him seems smoothed over, a rose free of thorns.

Instead of talking about it, Steve lets Billy convince him into handing over the last of his quaaludes and Temazepam. State-regulated medication has good street value, and Billy offers to split the cash 50-50 once he finds a buyer. Steve doesn't argue, even though he knows Billy has his own vices; too much of their relationship Post-Incident feels like they're standing on rotten floorboards, like something's going to give way under their feet at any moment and then they'll have a blow-up even worse than the one in May. They don't talk about that, either, although both of them know it's there;

niggling like an open flap of skin in the mouth that you can't reach with your tongue, but you can taste the blood.

During the week, when Jane's at school, they go for drives. Out of town, out in the open air, following the path of the river; driving until they find a waterfall, an abandoned waystation, or a meadow of wildflowers where the sun is an eternal flame burning on the horizon and time slows to an ant crawling along a crack in the sidewalk. It's not like before, when they each had their own secret motivations in their search for the other; Billy being driven by a need for a punching bag and Steve by his need to feel like a person, instead of a quivering ball of neuroses. No—now, Billy is slower, softer as he spreads Steve out over his leather jacket, like he understands the gravity of this moment being just *them* after the agony of five months of not-knowing, and he doesn't want to take any part of Steve for granted. The kisses linger; kisses to make up for all the time they lost, and the time they need to take now to remember each other, the old language their bodies used to speak inside the womb-like dark of night.

Three weeks become four and then it's November, but the heat, like a nag, doesn't let up. On what's meant to be the last Saturday of fall, Billy finally locates the wasp nest that's been giving Jane so much grief and detonates a lump of C-4 inside the hole. The riverbank goes up in a whooshing mushroom cloud of dirt and shattered tree saplings, and Billy drops the mangled nest proudly at Steve's feet like it's the severed head of his sworn enemy. Steve has the overwhelming urge to blab that he never threw the nail bat in the river like Billy asked him to, that sometimes he feels like one of those billboards you see nailed outside construction sites, the ones that proclaim 21 DAYS SINCE LAST INCIDENT—SAFETY FIRST! That there might be a hidden, unspoken part of him waiting for something to break their streak of good days, just so he can turn to Billy and say, with bitter triumph, *there, I told you so*. He doesn't want to keep count, but he can't help himself.

\*

"I like it," Steve says.

Sunlight infuses the surface of Billy's hair as he moves, bringing out all the different shades of brown and gold. They're drifting, floating

in the shallows of Eel Race River, Billy holding Steve's legs around his hips as they bob along under a lazy late afternoon sun. "Like what?" he says. "The shorts?"

"No." Steve gives him a playful pinch on his bicep; Billy retaliates by releasing his hold on his ankles, letting him flounder in the current before lifting him back up again. "I like you being a big brother."

(*Being a dad*, he thinks, with a curious inward shiver; it's a stupid, day-dreamy thought, one that belongs to pre-Steve, a Steve who'd driven Nancy away with talk of marriage and *our kid is totally gonna have your eyes and my hair* and a white picket fence garnishing the whole package like a pretty bow. Stupid, stupid, stupid.)

"You don't like me in short shorts?" Billy gives a suggestive roll of his hips. "You *wound* me, Harrington—"

"You know you look good in shorts, you don't need me to tell you that," Steve says, and Billy blinks, looks away. Steve thinks he might even be blushing, but it's difficult to see; Billy's skin is so dark now. "You've done that before, haven't you?" he adds. "With Max."

"Nice catch," Billy says, but he doesn't sound sarcastic, only thoughtful. "What gave it away?"

"Just how you were with her." That morning, Jane had donned her bathing suit and followed Billy into the river until they were both floating waist-deep, and then she'd let Billy lift her onto her back. Steve had thought it was impossible, but Billy was good with her; he'd remained calm even as her legs began to thrash and kick, holding his hands flat underneath her body and telling her how well she was doing, how proud of her he was. Jane hadn't put her head under, but she *had* practiced her backstroke; it was more than Steve could ever ask from them both.

Billy lowers his head back onto Steve's shoulder, making a muted *humming* noise. "She's had a messed up life, huh?"

"Trust me, you don't want to know. I wish *I* didn't know."

"Used to do the same thing for Maxine when she was little. Back

when she could still stand the sight of me.” Billy pauses, frowning down at the small mark he’s made on Steve’s collarbone. “Susan couldn’t ever get her to take a bath, but—but if it was me, she’d do it. She’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“And now?”

Billy laughs, sharp and bitter. “Well, now she’s old enough to know better, isn’t she?”

“You don’t believe that,” Steve says. “You should tell her, man. Tell her what you told me. I think she needs to hear it.”

Billy makes another distant *humming* sound, but it’s off, guarded. His teeth tickle Steve’s collarbone, but they don’t hurt; only when Billy wants them to. “You said the runt had a messed up life, right?” he says. “Best I can do is not mess it up any more.”

“You’re doin’ just fine, Blue,” says Steve gently. “You’re doin’ okay. Really.”

With his other hand, he traces the letter *H* into the corner of Billy’s hip, just below the waistband of his shorts. *H* for *HAPPY*, for *HOME*. It’s a new game they’ve started to play, where, instead of talking, they’ll take turns drawing different words into the other’s skin, mainly with fingers, sometimes—in the dead of night—with their mouths. Two out of three, and then they swap over.

Mouth quirked upwards, Billy says, “Whatever. Can we just talk about how good I look in these shorts and how sexy you think I am? Yeah, let’s talk about that.”

Blueish sunlight flares through the trees; it’s getting dark, the temperature’s dropping. Steve’s fingers are pruny from being underwater for so long, but they feel good on Billy’s hips, right: embellishing the *H*, re-tracing the *A*, adding a flare to the *Y*. *HAPPY*. Steve’s happy, just like this, although he hasn’t said it aloud; he’s happy to just close his eyes and let Billy carry him forever, not caring where he’s taking him. Rivers all lead to one place, anyway; out to sea, and Billy was born by the sea.

“They’re too small,” he says.

“They make my ass look *fantastic*. ”

“Not in front of the kid,” Steve reminds him, and Billy snorts, letting go of his ankles and pushing himself upright. Water runs over the new-found muscles in his legs, the hem of his shorts riding up to give Steve a taunting eyeful of his pert ass. It was the worst and best decision Steve’s ever made, letting Billy borrow them. Best, because *duh*; worst, because Billy has absolutely no qualms at all about wearing them around Jane, a fucking *thirteen-year-old*.

“Just you and me, babe.” Billy cocks his hips like a starlet’s, playing with his waistband, flipping it over and up again so that Steve can see the outline of his dick, thick and pronounced under the bunched material.

“Still,” he says; his lips suddenly feel like rubber, moving slow and sluggish and silly, “we should be getting back. Dinner. Jane can’t be alone—”

“You know what, you’re right for once, Harrington,” Billy says abruptly. “The shorts *are* too small. Maybe I should just—”

He widens his stance, pushing the shorts down so the head of his cock is visible, blush-red and swollen at the tip. Steve doesn’t see where the shorts land when Billy kicks them off, barely hears the sound they make when they hit the rocks; his thoughts have slowed to a snail’s pace in full view of Billy’s spectacular nakedness, which somehow seems more natural on him than it does anybody else.

“Oh, Jesus H. Christ.”

“Thought you said you were Jewish?” Billy sinks back down into the water, prowling towards Steve on his stomach and eclipsing his line of sight until Steve’s world narrows and all he sees is Billy, Billy, Billy lifting his leg out of the water and pressing his lips to the crevice behind his knee.

“Don’t tell my mom that,” he mutters, inhaling sharply through his teeth as Billy climbs his mouth down his calf, biting into his ankle.

“She doesn’t like it when—”

(you leave)

“Steve?”

The momentary, terrifying sensation of falling through empty air drops open underneath him like a broken manhole lid; Steve’s torso swings upwards, Billy’s hand closing around his forearm and bringing him back to full consciousness. “W-what?”

“You know what,” Billy says. He’s still naked, Steve realizes with glacial amazement. Naked and so, so close. “Just then, when I was talkin’ to you, you weren’t here.”

“I was. I—”

Christ, it’s like he’s back at school, thrust under a microscope held by his teachers, his classmates, his ex-girlfriend, his parents; his ears are hot and a muscle in his cheek jumps like Billy’s attached an electrode to it.

“Hamster wheel, Harrington,” Billy says, after a second of silence. “Don’t think.”

“It’s not—it’s not—” Steve blows his hair agitatedly out of his face. “You do the same thing.”

“I know I do. And *you* know how hard it is to bring me back, don’t you?” Billy crooks his finger next to his ear, the universal sign language for cloud cuckoo land. “You gotta stay off that hamster wheel, Steve. Stay here, in the now with me.” He leans forwards, tightening his grip on Steve’s arm. “Those fucking hellhounds are gone. They ain’t comin’ back.”

*How do you know?* Steve wants to ask—no, *demand* from him, because it’s impossible, any of them knowing; sure, they haven’t seen the ‘dogs around but that doesn’t mean they aren’t there, if The Gate can’t stop them from coming through then nothing else will, *nothing*

---

He wants badly to make a fight out of it; anything to untangle the

knot of anxiety that's taking root in the pit of his belly like a flowering vine.

"You're so fucking stubborn." Billy pushes his face against Steve's jaw, nudging at it peeishly with his nose. "Move."

Reluctantly, Steve slides his legs down so they're resting flat in the mud. Billy settles between the gap, tucking his head into the crook of Steve's neck and pulling his hands over his chest. Steve can't deny that he feels good there, strong and solid, his body still emanating heat despite the cold water. Girls used to like sitting in his lap in a similar way, saying he made them feel protected, safe, and pre-Steve's ego would skyrocket; so much for his dad telling him he needed to be more masculine, ha! With Billy, he thinks that he might prefer it the other way around; that he could care less about being seen as masculine, and more about feeling comfortable in his own skin.

"Your hair's gonna go gray at thirty if you keep this up." Billy's chest vibrates as he talks, a low, easy timbre punctuated by the soft lapping of water around their entwined ankles. "Then it'll fall out and I won't have anything to hold onto when I—"

He turns around, pushing Steve back so that he's marooned on the rocks and Billy's climbing on top of him, straddling his hips with ease. Steve's mouth drops open automatically as Billy gets a handful of his bangs, tugging hard enough to sting. "Fuck."

Billy smiles down at him, more than a little hungry. "My thoughts exactly."

He tightens his grip in Steve's hair and he doesn't have to pull; Steve arches upwards willingly, chasing the taste of woodsmoke and pine and mist and something else on Billy's tongue, something fresh and clean and pure, like riverwater straight from the mountains and he thinks of everything he's read about rebirth and reincarnation, how farmers will set fire to whole fields of trees to encourage new growth in their seedlings, but there's something—a faint blip that *niggles* ever so slightly.

"You with me?" Billy pants in his ear. His cock bumps eagerly at the

inside of his thigh and Steve can't help himself; he carefully closes one eye, then opens it and repeats the process with his other eye. His brain tallies these two images of Billy as they coalesce and separate, but they don't disappear.

"Happy," he blurts out recklessly. "I'm happy, Billy. I—I don't feel like I tell you enough, but I just. I'm so—" He stops to breathe, thoughts flitting through his brain so quickly he can't catch hold of their tails, except for

(*you left me*)

Except for, "Are you—are you happy?"

Billy licks sloppily at his earlobe and laughs. "Happy if you're happy," he says, and isn't that just such a *Billy* thing to say—*happy if you're happy*, a phrase that could mean nothing at all, or everything in the entire world. Billy's a master of redirection; he'll have you eating out of the palm of his hand while he steals the shirt right off your back, leaving you off-balance and blindsided—and here he is now, kissing him, fingers deft and clever as they work their way under Steve's trunks, touching him *there* until Steve can't keep quiet anymore and he's crying up, up, up at the sky where the birds cry back at him, swaying from the trees like speckled fruit. All life sounds, in a place he previously thought was a graveyard; life sounds, coaxed off his tongue by Billy's mouth and whatever was niggling at him, surely Steve will remember it tomorrow, if it's that important.

Tomorrow—they'll talk about it tomorrow.

\*

Only they don't.

Only they never do, and before they know it, time runs out; summer, buxom and bright and seemingly infinite, like the mathematical figure eight, unspools. Time is their natural nemesis; it's easy, so *stupidly* easy, so forget that they aren't living on borrowed minutes of the day, that time doesn't operate differently for them, two boys trying to navigate love and heartbreak in a country town.

Winter slips between them like a knife to the ribs, traitorous, almost fatal.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Steve knew it would be bad; he knows what Billy's like, how much he hates the cold. Winter's always bad for them, especially Christmas. It's when the bruises get nastier, taking up large swathes of Billy's chest like the person who made them can suddenly afford to be careless and knows it, relishes in it. When Steve wakes up to a sky the color of frozen lead and Billy curled up at the edge of the mattress in the fetal position, eyes glassy and vacant as the eyes of a dead carp. Steve will touch him and Billy won't even react; he'll just shiver and turn over, retreating silently into the depths of the comforter.

The cold closes over them like the doors of a crypt, desolate, dark. Steve should've recognized the signs sooner. He knows Billy. Winter is when Billy starts to complain of body aches, pains in his joints, nausea and spotty vision; *psychosomatic symptoms*, he calls them. Mysterious medical malaises that have no visible cause, as far as Steve can tell. The word *psychosomatic* sounds made up; he urges Billy to see a doctor, but he may as well be trying to wring water from a stone for all the good it does.

Winter is when Billy shuts him out. When, instead of calling Steve, instead of *talking* to him like he promised he would, he simply shoves Steve up against the banister so hard it leaves a bruise on his hip. These bruises smart, but not in a good way; they feel too much like Billy's back to using him as a punching bag, not giving, only taking selfishly. Wanting to hurt, wanting to transfer some of his own hurt onto another vessel so he won't have to look at it anymore. Leaving Steve sticky and used and sore.

The bruises dot Steve's hips and belly like cigarette burns, and when he showers, the water drips down the backs of his legs and slowly turns pink as it runs down the plug hole. He wonders when he started to feel like a stranger in his own home. How it's possible to feel so terribly alone when the person you love is right in the next room.

Christmas would be bad. They never talked about it, but it was implicit knowledge between them; there's Mother's Day, Father's Day, and then there's Christmas. Steve figured they've been through

worse, and that now they're on the other side of all that, they're stronger for it. He'd naively resolved to stand with Billy through whatever bullshit the world threw their way.

Sometimes, if you pick up the phone and let the dial tone ring out, you can catch snippets of other people's conversations happening on the line. This is how Steve Harrington spends Christmas Day, 1985: listening to the neighbors discuss a car crash that happened outside the town limits in the early hours of the morning, killing two seniors in his class. Something about driving in the snow without chains on the car tires, and what a tragedy it is, because Rhonda Morgan and Scott Petrie were what they called a *power couple*: together since first grade, intelligent, good-looking, model citizens. Everyone thought they were gonna produce a pair of power babies one day, a boy and a girl as genetically gifted as their parents, but alas, it's not meant to be; Rhonda and Scott aren't the first teenagers to underestimate a Hawkins winter, and they won't be the last.

Billy doesn't call, but five minutes before midnight on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, the Camaro's wheels crunch heavily on the icicled drive and Steve, sitting in his spot by the fireplace with the nail bat resting on his knees, stands up to let him in.

The safety pin had meant to be a joke, some stupid idea they'd had while drunk in front of the campfire one night; Steve had dipped the pin in boiling water and used it to re-pierce Billy's ear, but someone's torn it clean out. Viciously: Billy's neck and right cheek is dark with blood, rapidly freezing in the sub-zero air.

"You need to go to the hospital," Steve says.

Billy doesn't say anything. He doesn't even ask about the bat; he just turns on his heel and heads directly for the downstairs bathroom, boots trailing bloody snow behind him. He locks himself inside and Steve's forced to wait, rolling the handle of the nail bat between his palms, slowly practicing his swing in the enclosed space of the hall.

When Billy opens the door, the bathroom is spotless, save for the faint scent of blood and vomit over by the toilet. This is how it is, and how it will always be: Billy will never let Steve see him at his worst, despite the fact that he's seen Steve at his worst plenty of times. Billy

always has to have control, even though the idea of it is laughable, a lie he's been spoon-fed since he was six years old: men don't bleed. Men don't cry, either. Only queers.

"Please, Billy," says Steve.

And Billy downplays everything.

He turned eighteen in October, yet Steve still has to see him off at number twelve, Cherry Road, almost every Sunday evening. How long does this go on, how long you gonna make me do this, huh? Steve will ask. Billy, tearful, picking at himself (Billy picks at other people, but not as much as he picks at himself), telling him that he can't do anything, it's just the way of the world, Steve. He sounds like a little boy; like the mythical little boy Billy once told him about, the one who followed his daddy around like a besotted puppy. How long ago was that Billy? Five years? Eight? It can't be that long. Billy's *still* that boy, deep down. His daddy will tell him to jump and he'll ask how high—higher, higher, look at him go! Where he stops, nobody knows—I *can't compete with that*, Steve tells Billy. Shouts at him, because it always gets to that point, when they're at their worst; the point of no return, where Steve's frantic and clinging to Billy even though he knows it will just push him away even further. *You're asking too much of me.*

"He's my dad—" Billy, outraged, on his feet; eyes wide and mad and frightening in their intensity.

"Not the dad you want," says Steve coldly. "Not the dad you need him to be. He won't ever love you like that."

The words sound cruel in his ears; perhaps they're crueler than he meant them to be, but they need to be said. He's tired of walking around on rotten floorboards around Billy; tired of feeling so fucking helpless, useless. Whatever it is that's driving Billy back to his dad's place, some twisted sense of loyalty, duty, fear—Steve's so *tired* of trying to fight it. How long will it be next time? he asks Billy. Three days? Four fucking months? Billy could crash his car out on the highway—they both know he doesn't bother with chains on his tires—and Steve wouldn't know about it until he heard it from someone else. *Please*, he begs, hating himself for it, hating Billy for *making* him

beg. *Don't make me do this again.*

Billy tells him he's fucking privileged. That he'll *never* get what it's like. *I've always done this, Steve, even before I met you. I'll do it after you, too. You're not special. It is what it is, with Dad. If that's too much, then end it, 'cause I'm sick of fuckin' looking at you.* Billy, face painted into a murky rictus of pain and spite by the light of the fire, picking at himself; biting his nails, scratching his elbows like a junkie in withdrawal, pressing his palms to his temples; *screaming* at Steve that he's just like Neil, always trying to control him, trying to have a say in how he lives his life. Fuck that and fuck you, Steve.

"Fine," Steve yells as he runs after him, bat spinning through the air; he feels the jolting impact in his shoulder as the nails punch into the wall of the foyer, knocking the family photos off their hooks and *God* it feels good to be moving again instead of standing still, "Just fucking *FINE*, ass wipe! At least I'm not the one who *LEAVES!*"

They don't talk for over a week.

He knew Christmas was going to be bad. But he thought they'd be together for the New Year, at least.

On New Year's Eve, 1985, Steve sits by his parents' telephone and listens to the ghostly echoes of all the people talking on the line. Pre-Nancy, New Year's Eve was his favorite night of the year. He loved the excitement of the countdown, the way everyone seemed nicer, happier than they usually did at house parties; most of all, he loved the girls. Tall girls, short girls, girls with braces, freckles, big tits, small tits, it didn't matter back then; their language was the same, and most importantly, it was one he understood. Girls are simple; girls just want you to love them back. Steve can do that. He's got a lot of love to give. Billy's idea of love is just ... *fucked*.

On the phone, Steve listens to Anna Fitzgerald talk to Tom Keene about her impending divorce, to Mabel Labrovitz and Jessie Whitechurch gossip about how Anna Fitzgerald is in love with the much younger Tom Keene and that's why she's divorcing poor wizened Mr. Fitzgerald, to Jasmine Stewart and Ronnie Redford speculate over whether they should go to Lita Andrews' New Year's Eve party, because it's snowing outside and they probably shouldn't

drive because Rhonda Morgan and Scott Petrie were on their way to a Christmas party when the car slipped down a snowbank and hit a pole, and Jasmine's saying Rhonda's body was so burnt up in the ensuing firestorm that Chief Hopper had to identify her using her teeth. Steve was invited to Lita's New Year's Eve party, too. He could go, sure; he could get with a girl tonight. He doesn't think it'd be too hard. The girls still like Steve Harrington; he's the *safe* option.

Maybe that's just what he needs: to shake the feeling of Billy off him the way you'd shake off a bad bout of flu.

But he can't quite shake the image of Rhonda Morgan's charred corpse lying in the snow, and at 8:03pm, Steve's still sitting in his living room when Jane calls. "Shit hit the fan," she says, before Steve can explain what had happened.

"Where did you get that one from?"

"That's what Blue says when things go wrong." Steve can feel her mind reaching, reaching down the phone line through time and space. It'll be easier for her, given that he's feeling this emotionally vulnerable. "You're ... not talking."

"I don't want you repeating what he says. Blue—*Billy*'s not a good role model, Jane."

"He taught me to not be afraid," Jane says. "He ... taught *you*, too."

"Hard to not be afraid when he keeps putting himself in danger. I can't do it anymore."

"It was like that, for me," she says quietly, "with you. Before. It was ... hard to watch."

Steve lifts his hand and rubs it over his left shoulder; instead of a sawing and *thunk*, all he hears is the slobbering howl of the Demodog slamming into him, Jane's petrified scream. He hasn't been able to move his shoulder the same way since. "I'm sorry."

He owes her so much more than that, of course; he owes her the world.

“I accept your apology,” Jane says. “You know, I can still feel ...” She sighs, distant and drifting. “It’s like ... looking down at a city of lights. I can feel every one of us, on a night like this.”

“Can you feel ... him?”

A pause. When Jane speaks again, her voice is just above a whisper. “I don’t like to. Blue can be ... worse than a black hole. Like the time I fell in the poison ivy.”

“Poison ivy’s worse than a black hole?”

“It *burns*,” Jane says. “It burns and burns and itches and it doesn’t stop, not even when you try to scratch it. It just hurts more and it’s *awful*.”

White, Steve thinks. White teeth standing out horribly stark against blackened bone, like a harbinger. Both Rhonda and Scott had been born in Hawkins; they should’ve known better. Billy, though—Billy had never even *seen* the snow until he came here. “What would you have me do?”

She mulls it over, then says, “Watch the fireworks with me?”

Steve ends up staying the night at Jane’s, drinking tea and flicking between reruns of *Cheers* and *Golden Girlson* the TV while the wind batters the shutters and the tree branches throw creeping wicked witch shadows across the walls. At 12:01am, they light sparklers and practice writing different words against the snowy air outside. *HOME. HAPPY.* The letters still burn in mid-air, even after fading, until they all seem like one word: *HOME, HOME, COME HOME*. He’s waiting to be found again, like Billy would even know where he is; it’s not too big of a stretch. He found Steve before, didn’t he?

The light on his answering machine is flashing red when Steve returns to his parents’ house the next morning.

“*Hey, Harrington. Fuck face.*” The recording of Billy’s voice is so strong and clear it sends a chill down Steve’s spine; it’s as if Billy’s standing next to him, laughing right in his ear. “*So like, I’m at this slut’s party, right? Can you guess who’s here? Laurie fuckin’ Powell, man.*

*Wasn't she your old squeeze? Couldn't keep her satisfied, could ya? Hey, you know that freckle right between her tits? Turns out it's not a freckle, man. It's a third nipple. Squealed like a stuck pig when I grabbed it ... God, she's so fucking loud in bed, thought we were gonna break the sound barrier ...”*

At 8:52pm, this was. Billy would've been perched on the middle island in Lita's kitchen, his hand making its slow pilgrimage down Laurie's blouse while the soles of his Dr. Martens kicked at the cabinets and left dirty scuff marks in the wood. Mouth hanging open in a panting jackal's grin as the coke, ketamine, molly—Billy's never fussed when it comes to his own annihilation—multiplied and wreaked havoc with his central nervous system, crashing from synapse to synapse. Billy's smiling, Billy's laughing, always laughing. If he didn't laugh, Steve's certain he'd be screaming instead.

8:59pm, 9:10pm, 9:15pm: all hang-ups. At 9:30pm, a message was left on Steve's answering machine but no one's speaking; it's just one long crackling burst of noise, pumping music, girls shrieking drunkenly into the receiver. 9:48pm and 10:15pm are, again, hang-ups. Finally, at 10:36pm:

*“Listened to that album you told me about.”* Billy's in another room; the music isn't so loud this time. He's sitting cross-legged on the floor, Steve thinks, playing with the corner of the flower-patterned coverlet hanging over the bed, stubbing his cigarettes out on the shag carpet. *“Wish You Were Here, by Pink Floyd. Gotta say, they ain't bad for a synth band. One of your better recommendations, fuck face.”* Steve can hear something rattling in the background; he guesses that Billy's found Lita's jewelry box, pulling out rings and necklaces and eyeing them beadily before slipping the prettiest ones into his jacket pockets, magpie-like. *“Poor Syd,”* Billy says. *“I read up on him, man. He inspired everybody from the Beatles to Bowie to Jimmy Page. Jimmy Page! And they kicked him off the roster after three years. Where do you reckon he is now? Dead in a ditch somewhere? Do you think anyone would know if he was? Would they care? Would anyone in this world care, Harrington, would you care if ...”* The line goes dead.

11:13pm, 11:45pm: hang-up after hang-up. Billy's last message was left at 12:03am on New Year's Day, and his voice is lower, thicker, like he's talking through a mouthful of ping pong balls; Steve knows

at once that he's taken the quaaludes. "*I keep thinkin' about what you said.*" Billy's teeth are chattering; he's outside somewhere. Steve pictures him hunched up against the glass of a graffiti-abused phone booth, denim jacket wrapped as tight as a straitjacket around his chest in a fruitless attempt to keep out the cold. "*About how I'm the one who leaves. And you might be right. But you know what? You're also wrong, 'cause people leave me, too. You can't fault me for it. I don't know any better. You know that Led Zeppelin song, the one where Plant sings, 'I've got to ramble'? That was my mom. She never stayed for anything, man. You always ask me why I can't stop moving. That's why. I got her hair, I got her eyes, and I got her restless heart. I know you're pissed, but how do you think Dad feels?*" Laughter follows, but it rolls off Billy's tongue slow, caramelized; that's how you know the 'ludes are working, when they make it hard to talk, hard to do anything except close your eyes. Billy can't close his eyes. "*Whatever, man. It's all temporary. People come and they go, they never stay. The only thing I got that stays ...*" A truck roars past, drowning Billy's voice out so that the only part Steve catches is the end of his sentence: "*My fucking head.*"

Billy can't close his eyes. Steve knows there's a truck stop close to Hawkins, and it has a phone booth. He could get the road map from his dad's study and drive out there, have a look around. Maybe ask the guys at the bar if they saw a blue-eyed ghost hanging around the phones outside. If Billy closes his eyes, the cold will kill him.

January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1986: Steve's vampiric, sleeping all day and lying awake at night. The phone rings, but it's only Hopper, telling him that this is a courtesy call informing the residents of Hawkins that the roads are closed due to the snow. The road toll is always higher over the winter break, Hopper says; he asks Steve if he has chains on his tires. Scott Petrie didn't have chains on his tires when he took his girl for a joy ride, and according to Ronnie Redford, he was decapitated the instant his car plowed into the pole. Steve wonders if Jane knows about the map in his dad's office, if she's able to reach that far.

He's trapped in his parents' house, suspended in time like a mosquito in amber. Unable to sleep, afraid to sleep; waiting, waiting. To make matters worse, some *asshole* in a blue Camaro keeps doing burnouts in the cul-de-sac. On the hour, every hour, Steve will hear the

banshee shriek of an engine, then see the headlights beam underneath his closed blinds as the driver whips past the living room window, tires spinning precariously on the black ice. What time is it? Nearly sunrise, he hopes; hard to keep count, when every night feels the same. Steve side-steps the broken glass in the hall that he still hasn't swept up; he remembers shouting, swinging his baseball bat. The family photos aren't too big a loss; his mom has them taken every year, but she might divorce his dad before she does them again this year. Wishful thinking, that.

Twenty minutes after he unlocks the front door and turns the porch light on, there comes a *click* and slow, heavy footsteps as a Billy-sized shadow steals into the room, breath streaming out in front of him in thick white gusts.

"I dreamed you were eaten by a troll," Steve says drowsily.

The mattress dips under Billy's weight as he crouches down. He doesn't crawl under the comforter next to Steve; he seems almost scared to. "Crocodile," he says.

"What?"

Billy shudders, turning his face away. "Nothin'."

Steve reaches upwards, pushing some of Billy's hair off his neck, wet with melting snow. The skin behind his earlobes is fragile, soft as a newborn's; he doesn't seem to be hurt anywhere that Steve can see. "You're gonna catch your death out there," he says. "Come here."

Billy's hands are so cold they burn, painful to the touch; Steve hauls him back so that he's not hanging off the edge of the mattress, pulling the blankets over them both and wrapping his arms around Billy's chest. Billy smells of car leather and cheap whiskey, and his teeth continue to chatter as Steve slips his hands under his clothes to share some of his body heat.

"I can't keep doing this."

"So then end it." *If you dare*, Billy's tone seems to imply.

"You don't want that."

Billy sighs. He sounds exhausted, like he's eighty years old instead of a child in a young man's body. His thumb finds Steve's knuckle and presses in gently, brushing back and forth. "Doesn't matter what I want, Steve."

"But it *does*." Why couldn't Billy understand what he was saying? Did he even want to? "It's all that matters, Billy, because you *know* what I want."

Billy's thumb stills. He seems to be growing smaller in Steve's arms, limbs withdrawing in towards his body like he's trying to protect himself from invisible blows. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

"That's a crock. You got a whole floor to yourself here."

"People will talk."

"People *already* talk," Steve says. "They'll always talk, for as long as we're together. Tough shit. You deal with it or you don't, because I can't—if you won't stay, then I can't keep waitin'—"

"I'll stay," Billy interrupts. "I don't know how long—but if—if you'll have me, I'll stay."

It's not enough, Steve thinks resentfully. No matter how much Billy promises him, it won't ever be enough; they're all just words at the end of the day, with about as much substance to them as piss in the wind.

"Steve," Billy says, and then he's turning to face him, breath hot and boozy on the pillow; Steve thinks of the gummy residue left from eons of spilled drinks and puke that seems to be built up on the countertops of every roadside bar. He wants to ask Billy how many white crosses he passed on the way in, if he knows Rhonda and Scott are dead. "Can I stay?"

"Take your clothes off."

Billy's lips pull back. "Tryna get me naked?"

"You wish." Steve sits up, tugging at Billy's denim jacket impatiently. "Come on, take your clothes off. You're gonna get hypothermia if

you go to sleep like this.”

Billy gives a croaky laugh, but he lifts his hips so Steve can get at his belt buckle, pulling it free and setting it down on the floor. “What would I do without you?”

“I don’t know. Go back to Laurie?”

(*Did you enjoy my sloppy seconds, Hargrove? he almost says. She keep you warm at night? She make you forget what it’s like to feel so empty inside it’s like your soul aches with it, even for a little while?*)

“We never fucked,” Billy says, helping Steve pull his jeans off his legs. “I just said it ‘cause—I dunno. I was so fucking mad at you. First thing that came to mind.”

Steve says, “Didn’t think you did, anyway.”

Billy’s socks come next, then his jacket and T-shirt. That’s all Billy was wearing, out in the snow. Out in the dark. He never has anything else, nothing tangible to carry around with him like Steve had Billy’s necklace and his leather jacket. Steve’s hands run laps over Billy’s bare chest, checking for blood, tender ribs, swelling; Billy’s limp, boneless, letting Steve shuffle his arms and legs around without a word of complaint. Little doll, Steve thinks absently. Pull his string until it snaps, stick nails in his chest, break off his plastic painted hand and throw it under your bed to be forgotten.

“You know me,” Billy says.

“Yeah.”

“Do you wish you didn’t?”

“Billy—”

“You do, sometimes,” Billy whispers in his ear. “You’re not a fucking idiot.”

“I—I’m not having this conversation.” Steve lies back down, pulling the comforter up to his chin. “There’s a clean towel for you in the bathroom if you need a shower—”

"Don't wanna shower. Wanna stay."

In the dark, Billy's eyes sockets look empty, gouged out and bleeding down his cheeks like the crows have finally gotten to them. "You gotta tell me," he says, still croaky, congested. Probably getting sick. "Tell me, and I'll stay."

"Stay," Steve says. He hooks his ankle around Billy's calf, guiding his head down onto his shoulder. Smoothing his hair off his face, feeling the way his eyelashes tickle at his palms like moths clamoring around a bright light.

"It helps," Billy says, "to hear you say it. That you need me."

They fall asleep like that, crammed together on Steve's squashy camping mattress as a weak wintry sun slumps over the horizon and turns the gaps under his blinds a burnished gold. Mid-morning, Steve wakes very suddenly, certain that Billy's not there, that he must have dreamed the whole thing, but then he opens his eyes to their fullest extent and sees that Billy's just turned on his side, Steve's other hand draped over his chest. His thumb moves over Steve's knuckles in his sleep, cyclical; time being a wheel, rolling and rambling and returning them back to the same place: here, in Steve's bed.

### Notes for the Chapter:

This fic is kicking my ass, man. Sorry to those of you who were expecting the fluff and domesticity 'cause I said it would happen. (it kind of did??? no??). Just to clarify, I don't write angst for the sake of writing angst; I just don't want to sugar coat stuff, and I feel like it's important to show this fragile adjustment stage where Steve and Billy are still trying to deal with what happened in May and how it's changed the relationship/them as people, and obviously not everything's gonna be coming up Milhouse right away, you know? Anyway, that's about as angsty as it's gonna get, and splitting the chapter into two not only allows me to rest a little easier between updates, but also ensures that the "happy ending" in the "angst with a happy ending" tag gets its own

chance to shine without feeling like a bizarre slip in tone.

## 5. Chapter 5

V

*More like a home.*

“Didn’t he bite the head of a dove off for a dare?” asks Will.

“That was Ozzy Osbourne,” Steve says, exchanging a bemused look with Jonathan. Secretly, he knows Billy would be delighted by the comparison to the Prince of Darkness.

“I heard he sold his liver on the black market for a pound of crack,” Mike says.

“If that was the case, Hargrove would be dead,” Jonathan says. “You can’t drink if you don’t have a liver, Mikey. And the guy drinks like a —” He stops himself, casting a guilty glance at Steve. “Shit—uh, sorry.”

“It’s okay. I mean, he still drinks,” says Steve. “Just not the hard stuff. And he’s stopped smoking—”

“He’s goin’ cold turkey?” Hopper says from where he’s chainsmoking next to the open window.

“Yes he is,” Joyce says, stepping past Steve. She plucks the cigarette from Hopper’s lips, squashing it out on the ash tray he’s got resting on the sill and ignoring the grunt of indignation she gets in response. “Which means for six hours, we’re going cold turkey too.”

“The hell *I* am,” Hopper growls, patting his breast pocket—looking up in dismay to see Joyce smiling at him, holding up the packet of Camels before slipping them into her jacket. “Hey, those are mine!”

“Honey, if you can survive a night trapped in an underground tunnel, then you can survive a night not having a cigarette.”

Hopper glares at Steve like he's somehow at fault for Billy choosing to give up smoking. "Ludicrous. The kid's going about it the wrong way. You never go cold turkey. And you never dial back on drinking and smoking at the *same time*."

"That's because you're biased," Jonathan says.

"Take it from me. All a man needs to survive in this world is a whiskey on the rocks and his favorite brand of tobacco. None of that Maslow self-actualization shit," Hopper says. "You tell Hargrove he's making a grave mistake."

"We're not telling him anything," says Joyce. "This is dinner with family, Hop, not an intervention. Now will you please set the table?"

"Ludicrous," Hopper says again, and then he's slouching off into the kitchen.

"Listen, if you guys need to smoke ..." Steve begins, but Joyce shakes her head.

"He's just being a big baby, Steve. It's okay. It's only six hours." She rests her hand on his shoulder and gives it a squeeze. "We're happy for you."

"Thanks," he says awkwardly, and her touch lingers for a second, like she wants to say something else, but then the doorbell rings. "That's, uh—I think that's him."

Right on cue, Jane comes skipping down the stairs, followed by Nancy. "Remember that Audrey Hepburn movie we watched once?" Nancy's face is aglow with pride as she puts her hands on Jane's shoulders and turns her around so he can see the complicated twist she's weaved with her hair. "The one that made me cry and that you hated?"

"*Funny Face*," he says, nodding. Nancy has dressed Jane up as a miniature caricature of Hepburn's character from the movie, complete with a cozy black turtleneck, cut-off pants, and smart, frilly-socked loafers. "You nailed it, Nance. Good job."

*"It is chichi, and an unrealistic approach to self-impressions as well as*

*economics,*" Jane recites; Nancy jumps, but Steve only laughs.

"Jesus, you two are giving me trauma flashbacks. Alright, into the hall, Jane."

Jane runs off, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet, but before he can trail after her, Nancy's voice pulls him back: "Steve."

Her hand is curled around his wrist. She's so close he can smell her perfume, but it's a different scent from the one he's used to; he figures Jonathan probably bought it for her. It's not hard to remember a time when her touch sent adolescent excitement bolting up his arm, when he would've taken that hand and kissed it all over until she laughed and knocked his shoulder: *you're an idiot, Steve Harrington*. Christ, has it really been three years? He'd been so sure of who he was and what he wanted back then. Funny—and scary—how much things can change. How much he's changed.

"Is this really what you want?" Nancy asks, because while she might not know him now, she did once. They still have those parts of each other, buried deep like shrapnel.

Instead of kissing her, Steve simply lets her hand fall. "Would you believe me if I told you yes?"

When Nancy looks at him, her gaze is searching, analytical. She doesn't want to believe him, he can see that. But she also doesn't have a choice. Billy hadn't liked the idea of her being here tonight; they'd argued about it, Billy telling him to stop being such a damn gentleman, Steve retorting that it's less about being gentlemanly, and more about moving on. The two chapters of his life slotted together in the same room, symbolism upon symbolism.

He understands the difference between that and a metaphor, now.

"It's okay, Nance," he says. "It's okay."

This time, he's telling her the truth.

"Hey, Steve. Are we meant to just like. Wait here for you?" Mike says, sticking his head out of the double doors leading to the dining room.

“Uh, yeah,” Steve says, turning away. “Like, that’s exactly what we discussed. Me and Jane open the door, the rest of you wait in the other room. Problem?”

“No, it’s just weird,” says Mike. “This whole night’s going to be weird, I can tell.”

The doorbell rings again, insistent.

“Don’t fucking make it weird, then.” The doorbell shrieks a third time and Steve makes an agitated shooing motion with his hands. “*Mike.*”

“Okay, okay! Come on,” Mike says to Will, who’s peering curiously over his shoulder; the two of them dart back into the dining room like startled fish. Nancy gives Steve one last look of worry before, thankfully, backing away, silently shutting the double doors behind her. Steve exhales unevenly, wishing he’d sculled the wine glass Jonathan had poured for him back in the kitchen. Too late now.

Jane’s waiting for him in the foyer, straight-backed and calm. “Just checking,” he says to her, “what date is it?”

“April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1986,” she answers immediately. “Six months, twenty-six weeks, four thousand hours, and—”

“—almost sixteen million seconds.” Steve catches the eye of his reflection in the hallway mirror and straightens the collar of his new shirt: light blue, covered in repetitive patterns of cacti. Just the sort of shirt his dad would call a *Hawaii Five-O*. “Reckon we can make it to another six months?”

“If you open the door,” Jane says, pointedly. Steve dawdles, pretending to fix his hair, fiddling with his collar, thinking: Christ, is this how girls feel before the first date? Like their guts are about to climb out of their throats in steaming red-purple coils? Billy’s been to his house plenty of times, hell, he practically lives here—so why does Steve suddenly feel so *uncertain* about it all? “Steve.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t rush me, okay?” he snaps, still dawdling. Jane utters a small sigh, then jerks her head at the door. It swings open soundlessly, jamb whispering against the welcome mat he’s laid

across the floor.

“Fucking *finally*,” Billy says, stomping over the threshold. “This how you treat all your guests, Harrington?”

Steve remains purposefully preoccupied with his reflection. “I was upping up the suspense.”

“Save it for a night when it’s not colder than a witch’s tit, will ya?”  
Billy stoops low, planting a whiskery kiss on Jane’s hair. “Runt.”

Jane stands up on her tip-toes to hug him. “Blue.”

“I got somethin’ for you,” Billy says, and with a complicated sleight of hand gesture that Steve most definitely would’ve missed if he hadn’t been watching in the mirror, he produces a bouquet of flowers out of nowhere and hands it to her.

“You—” It’s not often that Jane’s taken by surprise; her eyes widen to perfect shocked circles as she stares up at Billy, mouth opening and closing. “You—how did you—?”

“Try to understand, he’s a magic man,” Steve says quietly. Collar appropriately flattened, insides warm and palms electric, he turns around. Billy’s leaning against the door frame, looking rugged and darkly handsome in a velvety black suit—total overkill, but then Billy’s never quite been able to curb his penchant for upstaging everybody else present. “You don’t scrub up too badly, do you?”

Billy’s face splits into a grin. “I like the shirt,” he drawls, sidling forwards to flick at Steve’s cacti-patterned collar with his fingertip. “Makes me think of San Diego.” He leans in, tongue flirting with the shell of Steve’s ear. “If you like pricks, Harrington, I can show you a real *big* one.”

“Why would I want that, when you’re already the biggest prick I know?”

Billy lets out a witchy cackle, palming the back of Steve’s jeans. “Not in front of the kid, *Jesus*.”

Jane’s standing there holding the bouquet of flowers loosely against

her chest, her head tilting from side to side. “I didn’t cheat,” she says finally, with somewhat of a pout. “*Blue* did.”

“They’ll need to be put in some water, Jane,” Steve says. When she tries to push past him in the direction of the kitchen, he reels her back by the elbow. “Hey, hey, hey—what do you say, huh?”

She clears her throat, spinning back around to face Billy. “*Thank you.*”

“Good girl. There’s a vase in the pantry if you can reach it. Dinner’s in five.”

“The way she looks at you,” Billy says, once they’re alone. “It’s like —”

“Like what? *You’re* her favorite.”

“Nah, she only likes me ‘cause I have the cooler car. And I buy her KFC when you say no.” Billy’s new earring dangles as he cocks his head, looking at Steve almost wonderingly. “You, though. She’s imprinted on you like a duckling.”

Steve feels himself flush under the heat of Billy’s gaze. “Yeah, well. It’d be a hell of a lot easier if you were more consistent and didn’t undermine me all the time, *Mr. California*,” he says, folding his arms. “Where’d you get the suit?”

“Called in a favor. Figured you’d like seein’ me all gussied up.” Billy flutters his eyelashes with mock coyness and Steve wonders if he’s wearing eyeliner; his lashes look darker than usual, his eyes strikingly blue in contrast. The thought warms his face further—not just that Billy might have put this much effort in for *him*, but also that when Billy looks this good, it means he’s feeling good in general, and he wants you to know it. Steve wouldn’t have it any other way; a Billy who feels good about himself is what they’ve spent the last six months painstakingly working up to.

“I mean, you look great in it, don’t get me wrong. But I think it’d look better on my bedroom floor.”

“Yeah?” Billy reaches into his pocket and takes out a packet of

toothpicks, sticking one between his teeth in place of a cigarette as he eyes Steve appreciatively. “You wanna skip dinner and go upstairs to test that theory?”

Steve’s only just getting his fingers around the silk of Billy’s tie when Joyce walks in. “Billy! Welcome!”

“Ms. Byers,” Billy says, stepping away from Steve with a wink. While Joyce is no Karen Wheeler, her face still lights up with school girl rapture when Billy presses her hand to his lips, the very picture of knightly valor. *Suck up*, Steve mouths at him over her shoulder.

“Oh, none of that, sweetheart,” Joyce says. “We’re all family here, which means you can call me Joyce and I’ll call you Billy, if that’s okay with you.”

Billy’s smile goes a little strained at the edges. He hadn’t wanted Nancy to come tonight; before that, he hadn’t wanted to come at all, the word *family* loaded with all sorts of unfortunate implications. Steve gets it; the idea of spending Passover with his parents used to conjure up mixed feelings of wistful regret and downright queasy horror. That same queasiness sinks low in his belly as he watches Billy chew on the end of his toothpick like it’s the only thing keeping his feet on the ground; waiting, waiting for his smile to fracture inevitably into a snarl—

“Family,” Billy says, blinking. “Yeah. Cool.”

“Just—” Steve stops him before he can follow Joyce. Billy’s buttoned his shirt all the way up to the collar, and it looks strange on him, wrong, his neck too confined. “This ain’t church, Hargrove,” he murmurs, undoing the top two buttons so that the silver of Billy’s necklace gleams brightly against his shaved chest. “That’s more like it. Go get ‘em.”

Such is Billy’s ability to command people’s absolute attention that every eye is already on him when he enters the dining room. Will and Mike are seated as far away as the table allows, surrounded by drawings of wizards and Hobbits and marauding orcs; Nancy and Jonathan have chosen to brave a much closer proximity, perfectly in sync with their matching clothes of paisley and dark gray. They look

happy together, like a long-married couple. Steve wonders if he and Billy look happy. If Nancy—and Jonathan, and the kids, and all the other outsiders and onlookers to their lives—can buy it. Or if they just look

(*bullshit*)

It's Billy who breaks the silence first. Billy, ghosting his hand over the small of his back in a gesture of affinity—a telepathic *I got you*—before pulling away, bearing down on Jonathan like a lion crouching over a wounded antelope. “Got somethin’ to say, Byers?”

Jonathan smiles pleasantly. “Nothing that hasn’t already been said.”

Steve can hear the distant tap-tap-tap of Billy’s brain as his eyes travel across the room, over Mike and Will’s faces, both of whom seem too apprehensive to even say hello. “What’s this?” he asks, pointing to the Seder plate Joyce has set in the middle of the table.

“Bitter herbs and charoset,” Steve says, stepping forwards. “Uh, it goes like this. Basically the bitter herbs represent the cruelty the Hebrews experienced under the Pharaoh. And the charoset represents the mortar that was used—”

“Bricks *and* mortar,” Mike corrects. “Will invites me to these things every year,” he says to Billy haughtily. “Since elementary school.”

“You don’t get a gold star for that, Mikey,” Jonathan says. He stands up to refill his wine glass and offers one to Billy. “Get you a drink, Hargrove? It’s Kosher.”

“Can you still drink Kosher wine if you don’t have a liver?” asks Will; Mike elbows him sharply in the ribs. “Hey! I’m just asking.”

“Bitter herbs and charoset,” Billy repeats slowly, thoughtfully. He looks down at the bowl of matzo Joyce has left next to the Seder plate. “What about this?”

“Unleavened bread,” Steve says. He explains to Billy the story of the Exodus, how the slaves hadn’t even had time to wait for their bread to rise before they were forced to flee. Under his instruction, Billy snaps off a corner of the matzo and dips it in the charoset; head

down, eyes up, taking everything in. Tap-tap-tap. Billy's listening, but he's also mapping every door and window, every method of escape, Steve thinks.

Tap-tap-tap: Billy's eyes land on Nancy, and his grin turns positively diabolical. Breezing past Mike and Will, he settles down on her other side, hot, mean mouth chewing the matzo with deliberate slowness in her ear, scattering crumbs all over her sweater. "Doll face."

"Hargrove," she says coolly. She throws Jon an impressive withering look as she stands up and excuses herself from the room, Billy's mocking laughter following her the whole way:

"Aw, come on, baby, don't be like that—we're *family* now!"

"Thought they put you in the slammer, kid," Hopper says as he re-enters, and Billy stops laughing immediately. He stares up at the Chief, the emotions playing over his face like actors on a complex stage; shoulders squaring with military rigidity, mouth blossoming into a sickly teacher's pet smile, the one that says: *am I laughing at you or with you? You'll never know.*

"*They*," Billy replies, "could never take me alive, anyway."

Hopper snorts. "Yeah, so I heard. Well, I hope you're hungry. Joyce has got one hell of a feast prepared."

"Are we waiting on anyone else, Will?" Joyce enquires, handing Steve copies of the—he's still getting used to the proper pronunciation—Haggadah so he can pass them down the table.

"Don't think so. Lucas is at hockey practice. Dustin's grounded. Max—" Will shoots Billy a skittery, nervous glance, turning a little pink in the face.

"She couldn't make it?" Steve asks, putting a hand on Billy's knee.

Billy looks down at his empty plate. "She's with her mom."

"That's okay, honey," says Joyce. "There's always next year."

"Next year?"

“Well, presuming this is a ... long-term thing,” she says, and Steve feels Billy’s hand find his under the table. “We’re not orthodox. Passover’s more about being together with our loved ones than anything else. Although Will likes to sing some parts in Hebrew, don’t you, Will?”

The color in Will’s cheeks deepens as he gives Billy another shy across-ways glance. Steve’s starting to think someone might have a crush. *“Mom. Don’t.”*

“What? Baby, you got a lovely singing voice—”

“You’re so embarrassing—”

“I’m your mother, Will Byers. It’s my job to embarrass you,” Joyce says. “Jon, can you help me with the soup, please?”

Billy eats right-handed, gulping down spoonfuls of matzo and chicken soup while he holds Steve’s hand under the table. Steve will shift in his seat and Billy mirrors him out of habit; crossing his ankles, dabbing at the corner of his mouth with his napkin, tapping Steve’s knee when Steve turns his head to give him a look: *you good?* One tap means no. One tap means that Billy’s about to tear the place to pieces; two taps is not as bad as one, but it still says that Billy’s stuck too deeply inside the subterranean tracts of his own mind to be around people. Three taps, four taps, five—he’s getting there. Six is the optimum; six is when Billy’s better than good, he’s ready to party. Steve recounts the taps as they happen now: six, still six.

After the soup comes the main course: pomegranate salad, baked potatoes, and roast chicken. Billy doesn’t talk much, save for when it’s his turn to read from the Haggadah; a task he does with great enthusiasm, his deep voice carrying the story of the ten plagues dramatically across the table. Meanwhile, his hand draws words into the inseam of Steve’s jeans, their own private conversation taking place while everyone’s looking the other way: *snark, nape, pretty, nightshade*. All Billy-words.

“What does your step-mom do for a living, Billy?” Joyce asks. “I see her at the store sometimes, but she never really talks about herself.”

Billy takes a measured sip of wine. It's still his first glass; he's pacing himself much better than Steve and Jonathan are, and he hasn't ducked outside for a cigarette at all. "She's a seamstress," he says. "Works from home. Never really done anything else."

"She must like her work, if that's the case."

"She might. Maybe my dad likes it more, her being home."

"Does he work full time?"

"Nah. Only temp jobs. Menial work." Billy puts his glass down, then continues, "His leg was all shot up in the war, so there's not really a lot he can do, physically."

Next to Hopper, Jane's shoveling salad relentlessly into her mouth. Sensing Billy's eyes on her, she looks up and makes a face, letting a streamer of half-chewed spinach spill from her lips before Hopper claps a hand on her shoulder. "Ladies don't play with their food, they eat it." Wiping Jane's chin with a napkin, Hopper says, "Was he in Korea?"

Something in Billy's expression seems to have turned almost mask-like, features frozen in place. "Uh, yeah. With two of my uncles. He was the only one who made it back, though."

"That was a bad war," grunts Hopper. "I know we like to say that about Vietnam, but a lot of good men lost their lives because of General MacArthur's hubris."

"Your dad shoot any Commies?" asks Mike eagerly.

Joyce starts, "Mike, I don't think that's—"

"Lucas's dad fought in 'Nam, but I don't think he killed any gooks or anything." Mike shakes his head, as if he finds the lack of dead 'gooks' in Mr. Sinclair's repertoire a great disappointment.

"Well, that—that's good." Billy leans forwards, returning Mike's open stare gravely. "You don't wanna kill anybody."

"Didn't you almost kill Principal Whitechurch?" Will pipes up.

“Will!” Joyce gasps, shocked.

“What? Dustin said—”

Jonathan laughs dryly. “Dustin’s mouth is even bigger than his stomach. It’s gonna get him punched one day, I’m telling you.”

Billy’s finger taps Steve’s knee; he waits for another tap to come, but it doesn’t. The queasy sliver of trepidation drives itself deeper, widening the space between them: Steve on one side, Billy on the other. Steadily collapsing into a black hole. Blacker than night. Everyone’s staring at Billy now—even Joyce—waiting for him to speak. The atmosphere in the room is thick enough to slide a butter knife through. Billy’s fingers are trembling; his lips have turned white. Steve closes his eyes, willing the second tap to come. Please make it come, he thinks—

The smoke detector goes off, a shrill, piercing siren that has Joyce almost falling out of her chair. “Oh my God, I left the oven on!”

Flustered, she hurries into the kitchen. Less than two minutes later, she informs them that the oven’s fine; she must have forgotten to open a window. Steve says the smoke detector is of a German make, to which Hopper remarks casually that you can’t trust the Germans to come up with anything useful these days. Billy’s hand is a claw, digging into the denim of Steve’s jeans. He counts the taps: six. Thank God. When Jane lowers her head to dab surreptitiously at her bloody nose, Steve catches her eye: *thank you*.

\*

Six hours later makes it closer to midnight, and the time passes without Steve noticing its soft, steady ticking, the need to keep count for once blunted by other sounds echoing through the house: Jane murmuring sleepily to Hopper. Joyce laughing at something Jonathan’s said over the clink of soapy dishes. Nancy telling Mike off for tracking mud all over Steve’s floors. All life sounds, he thinks. He tries to remember when he last had this many people here, lighting up his windows and sending the shadows fleeing into the night. Making his parents’ house feel more like a home, instead of a place he sleeps in sometimes.

“Why don’t you ever talk about your mom?” Billy asks.

Speaking of life sounds. “Not really a lot to talk about,” Steve says. “I don’t know her that well.”

His fingers move steadily over the keys of Mrs. Harrington’s Vogel, mimicking a tune he picked up from the days of a lost childhood, wherein he’d sit cross-legged in the doorway of the living room and watch her play. Like a lot of the furniture scattered throughout the house, his mom’s piano has lain untouched, forgotten, for years. Place holders for where a real house should be. Just for show, until now.

Now Billy sits next to him, watching him play. “But you’ve lived with her your whole life.”

“I know. It doesn’t make any sense.” Steve lifts his hand to turn the page of the music sheet, resting in a little alcove just above the keys. “Sometimes I think … sometimes I think that if she could go back in time, she’d choose not to marry my dad.”

(He thinks his mom would choose not to do a lot of things, if she could. Not marrying his dad; not being Jewish. When you’re a kid, adults seem as mysterious and fascinating as exotic animals locked inside a zoo enclosure; you don’t really understand them, and you never think you’re going to take their place someday. They’re just … separate, whatever. But as Steve got older, watching his mom’s regrets do battle with her face and body in the form of lines and gained pounds and insomnia and hair loss, that glass seemed more and more transparent between them, until he was able to see her entirely for what she was.)

“That’s fucked up,” Billy says.

“Is it?” Steve leans back to stretch. “You know, it seems pretty normal to me. I think that’s *more* fucked up, that I don’t know any better.”

Billy shifts closer to him and tests a key with his pointer finger. His mom played the piano, too, he’s told Steve; she’d hold him in her lap while she played, the tips of her long, shaggy hair tickling his cheeks.

Steve's mom made him sit in the doorway. Billy's mom loved him. Devil's in the details.

"Did you see how Joyce was with Will?" Billy says, voice low. "It's so —"

"Wrong," Steve finishes. He lifts his head, giving Billy a small, sad smile. "Because it seems so genuine, right?"

"Yeah." Billy looks away, as if lost in thought. Then he says, "Sorry about your mom."

"Doesn't matter. Really."

"It kinda does. She's your mom."

"She doesn't feel like my mom. I mean, she gave birth to me and fed me and all that, but that's not what a mom is. Not really." Steve cocks his head, watching their shadows move together in the gloom. Feeling Billy's eyes, glow-in-the-dark, follow him. Billy's hand, still testing the keys, brushing up against his, as if unwilling to let him go too far. "This was my first Passover," he confesses.

Billy bumps his shoulder. "Mine, too."

Steve can hear the smile in his voice; it makes him smile, in turn. "Couldn't have done it without you, Blue."

Billy *hmms*, then wraps his arms around Steve's waist and pulls him into his lap, bringing them even closer together. One hand pushes under Steve's shirt to rest over his bellybutton; the other stays on the piano keys. "My mom sang, sometimes," Billy says. "She wanted to be a poet, like Bob Dylan."

Steve turns his head, intrigued. "Show me."

Billy smiles, shy and secretive, and then his hand starts to play a jaunty, honkey-tonk tune; the kind of tune more suited to a highway saloon than leafy, upper-class suburbia: "*I hear the train a-comin, it's rollin' 'round the bend ... and I ain't seen the sunshine, since I don't know when ... I'm stuck in Folsom Prison, and time keeps draggin' on ...*"

“Keep going,” Steve says.

Billy’s knee bounces underneath him as his foot thumps at the pedals; Steve leans back, into the gap between Billy’s neck and his shoulder blade, so he can feel the vibrations of Billy’s voice resonate down his spine. *“When I was just a baby, my mama told me, ‘Son, always be a good boy, don’t ever play with guns’ ...”* Here Billy’s singing turns low and sweet and soft, almost like a lullaby, *“... but I shot a man in Reno ... just to watch him die ...”*

Billy’s foot works like it’s tapping the pedals, but there’s no sound; instead, Billy’s kissing his neck, both hands resting over Steve’s bellybutton now. Each kiss feels like the first time Steve kissed him, the first time he felt that dizzying, sugary rush that made him wonder if he was falling for Billy the same way he fell for Nancy: headfirst, too quickly, with no safety net to stop him from getting hurt—and even though Billy breaks the kiss eventually, his chest heaves as though it’s been punched, and his hands don’t stop touching him.

“Can we go upstairs now?” Billy whispers into his hair, and Steve doesn’t say anything; he just turns and curls both arms around his neck so that Billy can lift him as he stands, balancing him on his hips effortlessly. He remembers when Billy was so thin he could hardly carry Jane. They’ve come a long way.

The upper floor of the house is veiled in darkness, but Billy moves like he knows the way to Steve’s room off by heart, even in the dark. *Especially* in the dark. They kiss upright for a while, Steve’s legs locked firmly around Billy’s waist and Billy’s arms anchored under the seat of his jeans, until Steve decides that he wants to see him. The lamp on his nightstand reveals what their eyes can’t: Billy’s copy of *Treasure Island* on Steve’s desk. Billy’s leather jacket, in its usual place over the bedframe. The quilt Billy likes to sleep under when the weather’s colder, stolen from the depths of Steve’s linen closet. Billy’s jar of coconut oil next to the lamp, his secret to a great tan, skin, and sex.

Billy sets him down on the bed, keeping his hand planted on Steve’s sternum while he undoes the zipper of his jeans and tugs them down. Steve can’t resist wrapping a hand around the end of his tie and using it to guide Billy’s mouth back to his; he’s been wanting to do it ever

since Billy walked through the front door.

As if he's read his mind, Billy says, "Damn, Harrington. I should wear the suit more often, huh?"

"Only so I can rip it off," Steve says, and Billy all but growls into his mouth, hands grasping the rumpled folds of his shirt to pull it off his shoulders. Pulse jumping, breaths coming in short, shallow bursts, Steve lies back on the sheets, spreading his legs while Billy unlaces his dress shoes. Trying not to look at the strip of skin around Billy's ankle, a lighter brown than the rest of him. Not even the sun can burn that reminder away.

"I'm so fucking proud of you," he says.

He sees Billy's head turn, his eyes softening under the glow of the lamplight. Billy looks like he wants to say something; it's very likely he does. Steve used to give him so much shit for being a loud mouth, and it's not that he isn't—it's just that, up close, Billy edits himself in a way that's so subtle, it flies over most people's heads. Maybe it's the ever-present threat of a fist coming at him out of nowhere that calls for the invulnerability; Steve's never asked, but he can guess.

Well, he doesn't need Billy to say anything. He just wants him to know.

He snakes forward, winding his fingers in the tips of Billy's hair and tugging until Billy's kissing him, softly at first, then with darker, deeper intent. "You pretty fucking thing," Billy sighs into his neck. His naked cock grinds against Steve's hip as they sway together, lost in the press of each other's mouths. "Get on my dick."

"Shit, Romeo," Steve snorts. But his heart crashes against his ribs as he turns over, pressing his face into the pillow, cock already leaking a sizeable puddle underneath him. It's rare that they fuck like this, with Billy behind and Steve on his front—usually, Steve likes to see him, likes to have Billy wrap his ankles around his hips so they can both savor that irresistible downwards pull. Tonight, though, he's willing to do it Billy's way. Six hours isn't a long time, but Steve knows how much it would've taken out of him.

"Don't I always make it worth your while?" Billy says. His hand, strangely light for something so large, crests Steve's bare ass, giving it a rough squeeze. Steve twists impatiently in the sheets, wanting to see him, but Billy's hand holds him there, as helpless as a newborn chick inside an alligator's mouth.

The seconds tick by. Steve can hear Billy moving around, and his cock throbs with the need to touch and be touched. Then, something warm and wet pools over his back and he freezes, biting down on his lip to stop himself from crying out. Billy's upended what feels like half a gallon of coconut oil onto his skin; *too much*, Steve hisses, fighting to sit up, *you're gonna ruin the sheets*, but Billy just shoves him back down with a snippy *fuckin' behave so I can rub it in, jeez, you're so fussy* and a disciplinary smack on the back of his thigh, a slick, harsh report that seems to echo horrifyingly through the whole house. Steve goes rigid, staring at Billy, both of them listening for footsteps on the stairwell outside. In those tense couple of seconds, Billy starts laughing at the disgruntled look on Steve's face. Despite himself, Steve laughs, too. That's good. They need to still be able to laugh with each other.

Billy looms over him, cock a warm, heavy bar that rests on the small of Steve's back as he runs his hands down his spine, fanning oil across his shoulders in broad brush strokes. Steve's drooling into the pillow, mouth hanging open in a silent plea for release, but Billy seems content with taking his time, moving tortuously slow. He kisses Steve's shoulder. Presses more kisses to the back of his ear, his jaw. Oily fingers directing his chin up at a slightly uncomfortable angle, just so he can kiss his mouth, his eyelids, and then his pulse. Steve inhales the breath Billy exhales, then holds it, skin thrumming with the effort to keep still. When Billy's fingers finally breach him, Steve feels heat shiver down his body and curl his toes, the thud of Billy's heartbeat against his shoulder ecstatic, bordering on awe.

He moans as Billy's fingers drive deeper and Billy moans with him; they fold into one another, bodies arching into a lovely half-moon shape atop the mattress. Billy adds another finger, pushing until Steve's moans reach a desperate, tender pitch. Just when he's thinking that Billy's going to make him finish this way—he could, and has done before—he feels the head of Billy's cock replace his

fingers.

It shouldn't be sweet. Not Billy smacking his thigh again as he begins to thrust, one hand on Steve's hip and the other around the base of his cock; not the frenzied, ragged heat of his mouth on his ear. It hasn't always been sweet; Billy had hurt him before, left bruises Steve never asked for. It shouldn't be sweet, especially in a position like this: on his knees, submissive. But it is sweet, the way Billy hoists him into his lap and buries his face in Steve's shoulder; lacquered in sweat and oil, slowing his thrusts and prying Steve's lips apart with a thumb so he can hear him come, panting, "Fuck, Steve. *Steve*—" before coming himself.

It's sweeter, wrapped in the gauzy afterglow. Billy plucks Steve's briefs off the floor and slips them back up his legs with another kiss to his shoulder. Sweeter, Billy settling back amongst the pillows to play with Steve's hair, twirling it into corkscrews around his fingers while he pokes another toothpick into his mouth. Sweetest, when Billy looks at him, quiet, eyes smudgy with liner. Blurred at the edges like a watercolor painting, hair a river of gold over his shoulders. Steve touches his face, wondering who's really the breakable one here, if Billy's more afraid of causing irreparable damage than he's letting on.

He dozes off.

When he opens his eyes again, it's raining.

Steve swings his arm out towards the other side of the bed, a movement so absentminded it's almost habitual. He stops when he feels it hit a body. "I'm here," Billy's voice says.

He's sitting upright with his winter-time quilt draped over his shoulders, *Treasure Island* held open in his hand. On the nightstand a stick of incense smolders, sending up fumes strange and mystical, almost pagan.

"Lazy head," Billy says, and Steve laughs. "Any bad dreams?"

"No." Steve blinks, feels his smile widen. "Or I just can't remember. Is that weird?"

“Most people don’t remember their dreams, babe. It’s pretty normal.” Billy saves the page, then throws the book down onto the floor. He snuggles close, burying his nose in Steve’s shoulder, hand settling in its customary place around his hip. “I almost forgot,” he says, voice muffled in Steve’s hair. “In my jacket.”

Steve fumbles blindly along the floor with his hand, picking up Billy’s suit jacket and frowning when he feels the object tucked inside the breast pocket; a folded-up piece of paper, or rather, several pieces of paper stapled together. “What is this?”

“Made it for you.” Billy’s eyes are turned resolutely towards the ceiling, fingers turning the toothpick over in his mouth like it’s a sprig of timothy-grass. “Open it.”

Steve peels the stack of paper apart slowly, his sleep-befuddled brain taking longer than usual to string together the jumble of letters scrawled across the front page: *The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog*, by William P. Hargrove, they say, in big blocky handwriting. Billy’s handwriting.

“Read it,” Billy says.

“I can’t—”

Billy huffs in irritation. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re stupid, right? Fuck me, if that isn’t the biggest pile of bullshit I’ve ever heard. Don’t play dumb, Harrington,” he says clearly, taking his eyes off the ceiling to fix Steve with a penetrating glare, “ ‘cause I know you’re not. Come on, read it to me.”

Hesitating, Steve turns a page, clearing his throat before looking down at the mass of words. His heart seems to clench when he realizes that Billy’s written it in green ink for him, knowing he finds green easier to read. Underneath each block of text is a small illustration, Billy knowing, too, that he prefers pictures over words. The first drawing shows a fox, grinning up at the reader with long black eyelashes and a smile as sharp as a rack of knives. A grin that’s somewhat familiar, Steve thinks. He begins to read:

“Once upon a time there was a quick brown fox. He was so foxy, all the

*girls wanted him—*" He breaks off, raising an eyebrow at Billy.  
"Really?"

Billy's expression is serene, completely unbothered. "Keep reading."

"And—and all the boys wanted to be him," Steve recites haltingly. He turns a page: more blocks of text, more accompanying sketches in messy ballpoint pen. He pictures Billy on his bed at home, tongue caught between his teeth as he bends over the lined pages of the notebook he used to bring for school. Scribbling and muttering to himself, tearing out pages in frustration to throw them in his wastepaper basket. "*The quick brown fox (QBF) played dirty and mean, and so he outsmarted them all. QBF—that's 'quite a beautiful fuckhead', if you're feelin' saucy. The fox was quite beautiful, but he could also be a bit of a fuckhead. He had to be, otherwise the boys would hunt him down.*" Another page. He can sense Billy perched on the end of the bed behind him, reading over his shoulder. "When did you do this?"

"When I was at home," Billy says, and Steve takes that to mean *when I couldn't leave home*. "Hurry up, you're almost at the good part."

*"Once upon a time, there was a prince(ss) in a tower who was cursed to never sleep. He kept his hair long and he was the prettiest thing you ever did see, except he was lonely. An evil sorceress had torn his heart out and left him trapped up there.*

*"Once upon a time, a lazy dog fathered a fox. He wasn't really lazy, he just looked that way. The dog was actually meaner than the fox, with a bad bite. The dog chased the fox everywhere, like a shadow. One day, the dog chased the fox all the way to the prince's tower. 'Let down your hair,' the fox called, sexily. 'Eat my shorts,' the prince said, like a little bitch."* With that, Steve shoves Billy away from him. "Okay, if you're just gonna be insulting—"

"I'm not." Billy smiles, wide and pleased, like he knew Steve would react exactly like this. "Come on, Harrington, play ball."

"I'm sorry, but what's even the point of—"

"Jesus, this is why we can't watch movies together. You ask too many fuckin' questions." Billy nips his shoulder gently. "Just read it, babe."

Please?”

Grudgingly, Steve does what he’s told: reading to Billy about how the fox romances the prince and helps him grow a new heart, how a little girl with curly dark hair and darker eyes descends from the clouds on angel wings to smite the dog with a bad bite. The last page of the comic shows the three of them fighting zombies with the lead singer of Motorhead, and then—nothing. Steve flips it over, checking furiously for another block of green text, but the other side is completely blank.

“That’s all?” he demands, feeling a little cheated. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“Well,” Billy says, reaching for another toothpick, “that’s up to you, isn’t it?”

*What the hell?* Steve scrunches his brow and turns around, looking Billy up and down warily, searching his smile for—what, he doesn’t know. “Billy?”

“You gotta finish the story, Harrington. You already know my side.”

“What side?”

Steve almost recoils when Billy reaches out. Running his thumb over the joints in his knuckles, his lifelines, reliving the hours they spent in bed looking at each other’s hands, turning them over as if searching for precious gemstones embedded in the hollows of them. Thumb on his pulse, gazing up at him through his eyelashes, Billy says, “Do you want me to say it?”

He swallows painfully. “I mean, yeah. I have no idea what—”

“You’re cold,” Billy says suddenly, still stroking his wrist. “Come back under the blanket.”

He draws Steve back, back, throwing the quilt over his shoulders so that they’re sharing it, like two kids at a sleepover, huddling under a canopy of manmade darkness.

“I never used to care about anything.” Billy’s holding both of Steve’s

hands now, his jaw set. “Not even if I lived or died. It was all the same to me. But then I met you, and—and all of a sudden, I was scared again. You—do you understand what you’ve *done* to me, Harrington?”

When Steve just looks at him blankly, he laughs, shaking his head. “You don’t, do you? You really don’t.” Billy lifts his fist and taps the side of his head with it. “I’m talkin’ about up here, Harrington. In my head, you’re always there. I can’t get away from you, no matter how hard I try. And I *did* try. God, I drove and I drove and I hit rock bottom, but none of it—*none of it* ever made a lick of difference. You’re still there, Steve. When I come back, you’re there waitin’ for me, and that’s all I—that’s all I ever fucking needed. Just you.”

Steve can’t breathe. It’s too hot under the quilt, too claustrophobic. He can feel Billy’s breath blowing over his cheeks, closing in from all sides, his own breath rolling around in his lungs like a loose ball bearing—

“I love you, Steve,” Billy says then. “I’m in love with you.”

“Oh my GOD.”

He throws the quilt off, gasping for air. His legs stagger off the mattress, landing with a soft *thump* on the floorboards, almost tripping over themselves in their hurry to get away. Steve stares at Billy wildly over his shoulder, hands reaching for his hair. Sinking into his scalp, pulling until he feels pain, hot, white, *cleansing* pain, needle at his senses. He’s still in his underwear, but Billy’s eyes make him feel like he’s naked, exposed. Skinned alive.

“Oh my God,” he says again. Pacing a couple of steps, swiveling around to pace some more. “Are you fucking kidding me right now? Are you—”

Billy cracks up laughing.

“Shut up, this is serious!”

“It’s really not,” Billy says with the hint of a sneer, and Steve stops pacing. Billy’s still smiling, but his eyes have turned hard, clinical.

Bottling the hurt, aiming it outwards. “Look, I’ll tear it up, if you want—”

“NO!” Steve shouts, running back to the bed. “Don’t you fucking—”

He tackles Billy a little harder than he intends, shoving him onto the mattress and tearing the comic out of his hands. For all his contradictions, his many smiles and faces and darkness that sometimes threatens to turn him inside out like a frayed sweater, there are times when Billy won’t be able to stop talking. When he will hold Steve’s hand, like he is now, and tell him a story. The reason, underneath all of that, is simple, yet brutally honest in its humanity: to be seen, to be heard, loved and accepted. Holding the comic to his chest, Steve searches Billy’s face for the trick, the punchline, the predictable quirking of his lips that will give him away as anything but honest. He doesn’t see it.

Squeezing his hand, Billy says, “Such a drama queen, babe.”

Steve’s going to cry.

Billy’s serious. Billy’s dead fucking serious, and that should thrill him—why doesn’t it thrill him? Why, instead, does it make him feel like he’s on the brink of splitting apart in two shrieking pieces?

“I—I lied to you, Billy,” he says. “I kept the bat. I’m still counting the days, the minutes, the seconds—”

He’s back on his feet, pacing again. Counting each step, dodging the gaps between the floorboards just in case they open up and something worse than a Demogorgon or ‘dog spills out of them. Complicated little rituals that feel necessary for a good day—and a good night’s sleep.

“I know,” Billy says simply.

“You ...” Steve gapes at him, then supposes he shouldn’t be surprised. Not really. Only that Billy kept it from him. “How long?”

“Since I came back the first time.”

“You never said anything.” He tries not to sound too accusatory.

“No. Scared to, I guess. You seemed so … fragile. Didn’t want to fuck it up.”

“You didn’t fuck anything up. I—I should’ve said something.” Steve hovers uncertainly for a second, then strides back to the bed.

“Wheeler got you good, huh?”

“It’s not—it’s not that.” He leans down, resting his hand on Billy’s jaw. Willing himself to make eye contact, even as the corners of his vision start to blur. “It’s got nothing to do with Nance, I swear.” He pauses, blinking frantically down at the hand on Billy’s jaw, eyes burning. Shit, he’s going to cry. They just had sex, and he’s going to fucking cry like the sissy his dad has always thought him to be. “You—you make it really fucking hard, every time, you know? When you teach Jane how to swim, when you come to Passover in a fucking suit, when you do shit like *this*—” he twists the comic into a tight ball, then untwists it, “—it just makes it harder to let you go. And I can’t tell you that. I can’t tell you how much it hurts, because if I do … if I do, it makes it *real*. It makes us—*this*—real, and I don’t—I don’t have control anymore.”

He’s crying openly, weeping into the crook of Billy’s neck. Distraught at his own reaction to Billy’s revelation, and yet, somehow, horrified by the revelation itself. Billy loves him. Billy told him the words first, words that, once said, are almost impossible to take back, and not without terrible cost. No one’s said those words to Steve first before, which means Billy is the only and the ever—

“Hey,” Billy says. “Hey, hey, hey.”

It’s not fair, Steve thinks miserably. Billy’s holding him and rocking him like a distressed toddler, hand combing through his hair, wiping the tears from his cheeks. It’s not fucking fair that Billy’s so good to him, when he should be the opposite. That’s what their relationship was built on, in the beginning—a transaction of sexual favors, and nothing else. When did the dynamic shift? When Billy saved him the first time, helped him heal after being attacked by a Demodog along Eel Race River? Jesus, he should be *happy* that Billy said the words first. Over the fucking moon.

“Promised myself you wouldn’t see me cry,” he says thickly, and Billy scoffs.

“Well, you’re a fucking failure then, aren’t you?” He nudges Steve teasingly. “I’m kidding. You saw me cry that one time, we’re even.”

“You’re right,” Steve mumbles, rubbing his eyes. “Billy—you’re right. I should’ve taken that stupid fucking Einstein poster down ages ago.”

“I don’t give a shit about the poster, Steve. Jesus Christ. I may not be a fan of your ex, but I’m not that petty.” Billy pushes himself off the bed, bending to pick up his trousers. Steve grips the edges of the quilt, pulling it protectively around his shoulders.

“Where are you going?” *Don’t leave me*, is what he means. *Please don’t leave me again.*

“I wanna show you something,” Billy says.

\*

Steve falls asleep in the car, waking only when the Camaro’s wheels bump over gravel. Billy lets the engine idle, his hand resting on Steve’s knee. The toothpick has been chewed down to a stub.

“Lover’s Lake?” Steve asks, confused.

Billy’s not looking at him. His profile, pale as marble in the moonlight, is cast sideways, out towards the water. “I always thought,” he says as Steve sits up, picking the sleep out of his eyes, “someday, Dad and I would come to an understanding. That he’d get down on his knees and tell me how sorry he was for all the shit he said about mom … that’s why I kept going back, you know? He didn’t mean to. He didn’t mean to take her leavin’ out on me, it just—it was just his way of grieving. Guess that makes me pretty fucking stupid, huh?”

“No,” Steve says.

Billy smiles, sad and knowing. “It’s okay,” he says, tearing his eyes away from the lake and back to Steve’s face, his hand on his knee. “You can say I’m stupid. God knows you’ve earned it.”

Steve grits his teeth. “No, Billy. You were just doing what you had to do to survive.”

“I was survivin’, but I sure as hell wasn’t livin’. And I don’t wanna waste any more time on waiting for an apology that I know won’t ever come.” Billy takes a deep breath, tapping Steve’s knee with his palm. “So. I need you to tell me.”

“No.”

“I need to hear it, Steve. I need to remind myself. Tell me what you told me over Christmas.”

*No, no, no*, he thinks.

He doesn’t want to remember that particular fight. The things he’d said—weaponized and held out in front of him like the jagged edge of a switchblade, intended to hurt and maim and maybe even scar—still float into focus when he closes his eyes and presses his thumb tips to his sockets, until the darkness swims and turns fuzzy, bright with stars. Steve doesn’t want to fight with Billy like that ever again.

“He ... he doesn’t love you.” The words slip out unbidden, his mouth moving independently of his weakly protesting brain. “He won’t ever love you. He won’t ever be the parent you need him to be.”

Billy taps his leg: five taps, then six. “It helps to hear you say it out loud, you know?”

“Yeah, well.” Steve reaches down to unbuckle his seatbelt. “Just because your dad’s a piece of shit doesn’t mean you’re not—you’re not loved.”

He lowers his hand over the one that’s still caressing his leg, lacing their fingers together. Billy has gone absolutely still; Steve would’ve thought he’d fallen asleep, except Billy’s hand is still moving, drawing shapes and words into his skin.

“You’re the first person to tell me that,” he says. “I never wanted to believe it, but ... he was wrong, wasn’t he?”

“He was wrong,” Steve says, and Billy wipes his eyes on the back of

his hand—frantically, like it's an itch. Steve waits for it to stop—for Billy's breathing to slow—before taking the opportunity to lean over and rest his hand on Billy's neck. "Listen to me," he says. "Every single person who was there tonight was there because they care about you—" Billy makes a small, combative noise, moving to break his grip, but Steve stays firm. "No, Billy. You're going to hear this. I know it's easier for you to forget or pretend that you don't matter. But you do. You matter to Jane, you matter to Joyce—"

Billy chuckles hollowly. "Well, I dunno about the Wheelers—"

"They'll come around. They have to. Because for me, this is forever. I'm not losing you again."

"You don't have to say it." Billy's eyes are shining, rolling in his skull like bloodshot marbles. "I know it's hard for you to say it ..."

"I wanna say it," Steve says, tracing his cheek, his ear. "I want you to know, Billy. I ... I do."

The rain has slowed to a drizzle by the time they step out of the car; it covers them like a fine gossamer curtain. Steve opens his mouth and catches some on his tongue. Lover's Lake ripples before him like a black, glittering skin under the stars; he watches Billy bend to pick up one of the many rocks littering the shore, flipping it over in his hand before sinking it into the depths. It occurs to him that the way Billy looks at bodies of water—with hope, longing, love—it's almost like he's expecting someone to be staring back at him from the other side. A woman with matching hair and eyes, perhaps.

When Billy turns around, he's grinning, half-wild. "You're gonna be so fucking mad at me."

Dotted along the waterfront are the vague shapes of cottages, lakehouses and boat sheds, a crowd of tall, pale sentinels rising and falling out of the trees. The Harringtons used to own a lakehouse back in the seventies—nearly everyone in Loch Nora did—not that they ever made the most of it. His dad sold the land in 1980, and looking back, Steve's wondering if he's ever forgiven him for that. If he's forgiven his dad for anything.

“That’s the house I’ll be living in someday,” Billy says.

At first, Steve can’t quite discern what it is that Billy’s pointing at. Then he realizes that the dark is playing tricks on him, and—well. ‘House’ is probably too optimistic a term; ‘shack’ seems more apt. Maybe it was grander back in its hey-day, when Hawkins’ main form of economy was logging; now, though, it’s nothing but a jumble of stones poking out of the hillside. Crawling with ivy, the roof leaning at a thirty-five degree angle towards the ground, a gaping hole where the front door should be.

“You’re joking.” Steve whirls around. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Uh, no. I already paid the deposit.”

“You *what?*” Steve’s voice cracks as it rises up a bewildered octave. “Where did you get the money?”

“I got a job,” Billy says. “I’m a working man now.”

“A job,” he repeats, stunned. “Okay, okay, okay, hold up, rewind for a bit. How much was the deposit?”

“Four weeks rent. Eighty dollars.”

“Jesus, that much?” Steve snorts. “You got ripped off, amigo.”

“Yeah, I know it’s not as big as your *castle*,” Billy says with a roll of his eyes, “but it faces west.” He pauses, distant for a moment, digging a hole in the sand with his foot. Then he says, “California’s out west. And there’s water—”

“You can’t live here,” Steve says testily. “Billy, you don’t even *like* it here.”

Billy draws his shoulders up. “Thought about going back home, sure. But then I didn’t know whether you’d follow me.”

“You could’ve *asked*.”

Billy’s shoulders draw up higher. “Nah, man. You belong here. You grew up here. Like it or not, Hawkins is in your blood.” His mouth

twists. “You think it’s that easy, leaving the place you’ve called home your entire life?”

*You did, Steve thinks uneasily. You didn’t have a choice.*

He never imagined that it would end like this; a part of him was always afraid he would be graduating with a Billy-sized dust cloud in his rearview mirror, disappearing over the horizon. Heading out west, getting smaller and smaller until he was nothing but a memory of a person, a voice, a necklace brushing the back of his neck.

“So you’re gonna rent a house,” he says, shoving his fists into his pockets to stop them from going for his hair, “with money you earned from a job. And what job is that?”

“I’m working with my dad,” answers Billy. Confidently, like he’s got it all figured out, but Steve’s not sure if he should believe that. “Cleaning.” When he sees the look on Steve’s face, he gives a dismissive shake of his head. “See, knew you’d be mad.”

“Of course I’m fucking mad! You didn’t have to *do* this,” Steve bursts out. “To keep me, you know, it’s—it’s insane! You won’t have any electricity, running water—and your dad! Does he know about this? What’s he gonna say when you—”

“He won’t say anything. If he does, I’ll call the fucking cops.”

Six months ago, Steve would’ve killed to hear Billy express such a sentiment; to hear him be so decisive about the man who hurt him and continues to hurt him to this day. Now it disappears right under the radar. “Still, Billy, you need running water. You need *heat*. Christ, and just look at the roof, it’s coming down—”

“I know it’s a fixer-upper. But I thought we could do it. You know, together. Make a project out of it,” Billy says, shy again. “Make it ours.”

“Ours,” Steve echoes, and then he’s laughing, the sound loopy, delirious, too high in his ears. “You’re fucking nuts. I can’t believe you went ahead and did this behind my back—”

“Well, I couldn’t afford a ring. What else was I supposed to get you?”

Steve stares at him, hysteria rising like bile in his throat. “You—you don’t mean that.” Shoving his hands deeper in his pockets, overwhelmed by the urge to take Billy by the shoulders and give him a hard shake: *do you mean it? Do you?* “Don’t you *dare* mean that—”

Billy kisses him.

The rain swirls down dreamily, feather-light, warm as a bath. Sticking Steve’s shirt to his chest, curling the ends of Billy’s hair. It sweeps over the trees, filling out the drooping sails of the boats gathered by the jetty. There’s enough space on the sand for them to play a game of baseball, Steve thinks. Him, Jane, and Billy. Jane would like that. He thinks Billy would, too. And maybe Billy already thought of that when he squirreled away his savings in a place his dad would never find them, never even guess what he was saving for—a house! An honest-to-God *house!*—knowing what was important, what he needed, what Steve needed. The schemer to Steve’s dreamer.

“When I was locked up,” Billy murmurs, thumbing over his lower lip, “all I could think of was how you were the best goddamn thing to ever happen to me, and I fucking—I fucking blew it. And that if I had a chance to do it all over, this is what I’d do. To show you.” He drops his hand, tucking it into the back of Steve’s jeans. “Money’s paid, Harrington. Let me show you.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve whispers. “You know you don’t have to.”

“But I did.”

“Yeah. You did,” he says, shaking his head. “And there’s nothing I can do about it, is there?”

“Absolutely none.”

“Fucking hell.” Steve sighs, sagging a little against Billy’s chest. “Alright, well, you can’t sleep here tonight. I mean, I know you’re paying rent now or whatever, but you still gotta come back to mine until we—we sort this out. Okay?”

“Deal,” Billy says. “But only if you agree to a new rule.”

Steve raises his eyebrows quizzically. In truth, he thought they were

done with rules; it's all very well and good to promise to try and talk things out when you're angry, but there were times—Christmas being one of them—when they were both so angry with each other, it was impossible to talk. Impossible to even be in the same room. “Yeah? Like what?”

“If you wanna talk, just talk.”

“And if I don’t want to?”

Billy’s foot digs into the sand with greater urgency. “Then don’t. But I like hearing you talk. And maybe you need to hear me say that.”

“I—maybe,” Steve says, which is a little lame, but as usual, Billy’s got him thrown for a loop. He wants to ask Billy how long he’s been planning this for. He thinks it might have been germinating for a while, spinning on its very own hamster wheel. And, as usual, Steve had been too concerned with things far beyond his control to even see what was happening right in front of him. “God, you almost gave me a fucking heart attack, you know? A fucking *house*.”

“You love it, Harrington. Knew you’d fall for that gay shit. *Forever after.*”

It’s all so fucking crazy, Steve thinks, that only *Billy* could come up with it; and only Billy, too, could pull it off. And then he’s laughing again, warm affection washing out the panic in his chest; laughing and tugging Billy to him, pressing unbelieving kisses to his mouth. “Oh, no, no, no, don’t you pin this on me, Hargrove. You’re as much of a sap as I am.”

They don’t return to the Camaro straight away. Instead, they stay by the water’s edge, watching the rain trickle down through the conifers and pines, shimmering as it catches on the lake’s surface. After a while, it stops; the color of the sky drains from violet to a pale pink, like the color of an abalone shell, says Billy. A loon calls from somewhere across the valley. Steve looks back at the tumbledown house—*their* house, soon, maybe, if Billy has his way—keeled over on the sand like the gargantuan skeleton of a dead animal, stripped to its bones by the wind and rain and the turning of the seasons. He imagines it with a door. A roof. A white picket fence—no, the fence

would have to be blue. White makes him think too much of his parents' place, his mom's empty, endless walls, almost as cold as she. A blue fence, and a room for the piano. Billy takes his hand again, as if he knows what he's thinking. As if he can see it, too. More like a home.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I might add a part 3 to this, i might not. For now, you should assume that this series is finished :)

That whole Passover scene was never in the original outline for this fic, but then I read somewhere that Joyce's maiden name is Horowitz and my brain was like '!!!' I thought it was a nice note to end things on, considering Steve's thoughts in chapter 2 about how he didn't believe he would ever get that sort of domesticity with Billy.

I hope this ending was a satisfying one, and that you all had a safe and fun halloween! If you like, you can contact me on [tumblr](#). This certainly won't be the last story i write for this pairing, so watch this space! <3